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A PEERLESS WIFE

BY

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'A TRAP TO CATCH A SUNBEAM' 'MINNIE'S LOVE'

'A GUARDIAN ANGEL

ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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A PEERLESS WIFE.



CHAPTER I.

THERE was a large, gloomy-looking house in the next village, about three miles and a half from Beechdale, over the gate of which was a board informing those whom it might concern that it was an academy for young ladies.

The prospectuses sent out by the Misses Crose, the two maiden sisters who kept the school, stated that the very best instruction was given 'in English and the modern

languages, drawing and music, by most efficient masters, and all the comforts of home life combined with the strictest discipline.' Let us enter the house, and see how this statement was carried out. In a large, long, carpetless room, looking out through a window opening into a square gravelled piece of ground skirted by a high wall, called the 'recreation ground,' some twenty to thirty girls were assembled. At one end of the room were five short forms, on which children were seated varying in age from five to nine or ten; the rest of the room was occupied by girls of from ten or twelve to eighteen years of age.

There was a complete Babel of sound, for the young ladies were always allowed half an hour before dinner to do as they liked. A bell always rang at the half hour,

not, as might be imagined, to give the girls an opportunity of dressing for the meal; they were not allowed to go up to their rooms after leaving them in the morning, save to dress for their walk; but before dinner and tea they might go to a large lavatory on the ground floor to wash their hands if they liked, but it was not compulsory, and so, as may be imagined by those who have had the charge of young children and are cognisant with their habits, not many availed themselves of the privilege.

A small, square looking-glass was hung up in this room against the wall, and three or four combs and brushes were placed on a shelf for general use; but as the glass was very small, and any face reflected in it looked as though it had been sat upon or

run over by a waggon wheel, the young ladies did not much care to consult it. About eight or ten of the elder ones were gone to wash their hands, and, as I have said, a Babel of tongues was going on in the schoolroom, when the door opened, and there was a sudden silence, as Miss Crose walked in leading by the hand a little girl.

‘Miss Jackson,’ she said, looking round the room as if in search of some one.

‘Not here, ma’am,’ said two or three voices.

‘Oh! you’ll do, Miss Griggs; come here. I want to introduce this little new-comer. I was going to put her under Miss Jackson’s care, but you will do equally well, and I am sure be equally kind to the little stranger.’

Miss Griggs, the young lady addressed, laughed ; why, she did not know ; neither did the governess who addressed her ; but she was so accustomed to see Miss Griggs laugh at everything that she took no notice of it, only turning to the little girl said, ‘ Miss Martyn, my dear, this young lady will tell you all the rules, and all our little ways, and prevent your feeling strange, I know. Go and sit beside her till the dinner bell rings, and I hope you have brought with you an appetite which will quite astonish us,’ and with this little pleasantry Miss Crose left the room and the poor little strange child, with her hand clasped in the cold clammy one of Miss Griggs, with thirty pairs of eyes all staring at her flushed and tear-stained face. After

a moment's pause, which seemed an age, Miss Griggs led the little child to a form, and seating her there, began to enquire her name and where she came from.

'My name is Rita, and I come from Beechdale,' she answered.

'What did they give you such a queer name for? I say, Polly,' said Miss Griggs, nudging a fat-faced girl who was seated next her eating some 'toffy,' 'she says her name's Rita; isn't it queer?'

'Vewy,' said the girl, with her mouth too full to answer plainly.

'Oh! have you ever been to school before?'

'No, never,' said poor Rita, with a fresh burst of tears.

‘Well, that’s not the game to play here, I can tell you. Crying will never help you ; you must pretend, if you don’t feel it really, that you care for nothing. We shall all laugh at, and bully you all day long, if you cry ; but just be brave and don’t-carish, and I dare say you’ll do very well ; and if you stick by me and do everything I want you I can help you famously. I can find you biscuits for lunch, and bread and jam after dinner, only you must do everything I want you,’ repeated Miss Griggs. ‘Oh! here’s Jackson ; don’t have anything to do with her—take my advice,’ she continued in a hurried whisper, as a tall fine-looking girl entered the school-room with two or three other elder girls.

There was a great buzz of many voices as she entered, all anxious to tell her a new girl had come.

‘Don’t stare at her then, poor little thing,’ she said to the girls who had entered the room with her; ‘let her get used to us by degrees.’

‘Griggs has pounced on her,’ said one girl. ‘Miss Crose meant you to take charge of her.’

‘I’m not ambitious of the honour,’ she answered. ‘Here, some of you, put my books away; the dinner bell will ring in a minute.’

Two or three sprang forward to do her bidding, and she rewarded them with a bright, pleasant smile which, by their manner, they thought reward enough;

and flinging herself down on one of the forms she called a little fair-haired weak-eyed child from the other end of the room and, taking her up in her lap, said, 'Mima, there's a poor little strange child come—she will sleep in your room—don't you tease her or frighten her, or you'll get no more "peppys" and "niceys," but, on the contrary, great Grimgruffin—you know him—will come and eat you up.'

The child raised her weak blinking eyes to Miss Jackson's face and stared at her, and then said, 'But if I am good to her, and don't frighten her or tease her, and don't tell of her and help her to do her lessons, what then?'

'Then, oh ! then, Mima, it will rain

“peppys” and “niceys”; showers of “goodies” will come down, all for Mima, because she has been good to the little stranger.’

‘What stuff you always do talk to that child,’ said a girl seated reading, or pretending to do so, on the same form.

Miss Jackson’s reply was prevented by the ringing of the dinner bell. A hurried scramble commenced, and tumbling over and pushing against each other the girls entered the dining-room, where the two Miss Croses stood waiting for them.

‘Gently, gently, young ladies; take your places quietly. Grace—Miss Mead, I believe it is your turn.’

A grace was muttered by the girl named, and they took their places. The eldest

Miss Crose, having with some ceremony pinned a napkin over her dress, stood up to carve. The youngest Miss Crose, having the cold joint at her end, stood up also to carve, but without the ceremony of the table-napkin. The girls were allowed no choice. Hot meat was given them one day and cold the next ; so that on Monday, for instance, the girls on the right hand all had hot and the left cold, on Tuesday the right hands had cold and the left hot. There were always four puddings ; the two teachers, who sat in the middle of the table, had one each to help, and there was one top and bottom.

Poor Rita ! That dinner was a penance. Little as she had been cared for at home individually, the excellent cooking, and the

comfort and elegance with which everything was conducted at Beechdale, had left her nothing to desire as far as food was concerned. Everything well dressed and well served she had seen even at the nursery table, and now to see the large coarse joints, half-raw—the heavy puddings—the half-cold plates—the dirty table-cloth—the hurry with which everything was gulped down, and what was not approved of thrown under the table—was as new as it was disgusting to her. She could not eat one mouthful, and was thankful enough when the meal ended and she found herself hurried along into the recreation ground. The girls were always allowed twenty minutes after dinner to imbibe as much air as could be obtained between the four walls,

when they went in for two hours' lessons, and then the whole school walked out, headed by the teachers, for a long constitutional up the high turnpike-road, two and two. During the twenty minutes allowed in the playground after dinner the young ladies chiefly amused themselves by consuming 'forbidden fruit,' otherwise jam, apples, pears, nuts, sweatmeats, buns, &c., conveyed to them by a little old woman who went by the name of 'Mother Red Cap.' Besides being a purveyor of forbidden goods, she was the school messenger, carrying notes and messages for the girls, going to the Lending Library for novels, and of late they had discovered a still more delightful use to make of her. She could tell fortunes. She could tell of the tall

fair young man and the short dark one, and the dark-haired woman who was such an enemy, and the grand coach they were some day to ride in, and the red-haired man they were to 'beware of,' and the lucky and unlucky days which were to be theirs through life, all veiled in strange mysterious words and signs which made their young hearts beat and eyes glisten with excitement, and caused many a lesson to be 'turned' and 'doubled' as the memory of the mystic words came back to them again and again.

Rita stood beside Miss Griggs, who had seized on her after dinner, and watched her making her purchases of the old woman at the gate, and saw her take an old torn book from her and give her some message;

but she took very little heed or interest in the proceedings, refusing—for her little heart was too full to eat—the cakes, and slice of bread and jam, which Miss Griggs offered her.

‘ Well, you very silly child, you’ve eaten no dinner, and you’ll be starved,’ said Miss Griggs. ‘ We can hardly ever get enough to eat here, everything is so awfully nasty. I don’t know what we should do without old Mother Red Cap.’

‘ Do they let you buy the things?’ said Rita.

‘ Who do you mean, the “ old Crows ” ? (by this appellation the governesses were known by the young ladies). Oh ! no, they would not let us if they knew, or at least let out that they knew. They *do* know we

buy things of the old woman—but she's a deep old thing, and has note-paper and sealing-wax, and knitting-needles and wools, and all manner of things in the top tray, and the "goodies" are underneath. So if the "Crows" fly down on us we all begin buying paper, &c. You'll find her very useful; she'll take notes and messages home for you, when you don't want them seen; for, you know, all the letters you write are looked over by the Birds, I assure you; so we scribble up in our rooms what we don't want them to see, and this old woman posts them or takes them to our friends, if it isn't far. Oh! she's an old duck, she is.'

To Rita's mind she had conveyed anything but a pleasing impression. She had fancied her face had anything but an agree-

able expression, and had thought, as she stood watching her, she should have been rather alarmed if she had been alone. She resembled to her imagination some 'wicked fairy' in her dearly beloved fairy tales, but it was certainly very comforting to know she could get a secret message conveyed home through her means, and so began to have a rather better opinion of her. Her father had seemed a little sorry to part with her, and had told her when he kissed her—actually *kissed* her—that he hoped she would be happy, and that she must be sure and write to him if she was not; and the means, therefore, of sending such a letter, if need be, was certainly a good thing to know of.

'Got the third volume, Griggy? said a

girl as she passed her, with her arm round the neck of her companion.

‘ Yes, all right. Stunning old woman, Red Cap, isn’t she ? ’

‘ Famous,’ said the girl, passing on.

‘ It’s time to go in now,’ said Miss Griggs to Rita ; ‘ you won’t have any lessons to do to-day, but you must go and sit on the small forms, and walk out with the little ones ; but I shall see you again at teatime here. Mima Morison, take Rita Martyn with you.’

The little girl called was the weak-eyed little creature Miss Jackson had spoken to. She had been watching for an opportunity to approach Rita and earn her ‘ showers of niceys ’ ; so, in a very kind but patronising manner, she put her arm through Rita’s, and led her into the schoolroom.

The dreary walk ended, and the meal called tea, consisting of some nasty stuff, with its accompaniment of thick bread and an apology for butter, having been finished, the little ones played for half an hour, and were then dismissed to bed.

‘ May I not have the blind drawn up ? ’ asked Rita, as she crept, cold and wretched, into her little bed.

‘ I don’t know ; we never do,’ said Mima, who slept in the next bed. ‘ Why, are you afraid of the dark ? ’

‘ Not at all, but I like to look at the sky till I go to sleep. My mother is there.’

Mima stared at her for a moment, and then, as if she suddenly comprehended it all and felt for the little orphan whose only earthly happiness consisted in watching

the place where she thought her mother was, ran the risk of a punishment, when the teacher came to fetch away the light, by jumping out of bed and drawing up the blind, kissing Rita as she ran past to her own bed, and saying,

‘There, now you can see the sky beautifully, can’t you ? I hope it will make you happier.’

‘Thank you so much,’ said Rita earnestly ; and Mima laid her head on her little hard pillow, and soon fell fast asleep, satisfied that she richly deserved, and that Miss Jackson would think so too, a whole ‘shower of niceys’ ; and Rita lay awake gazing at the sky, and thinking of old Mother Red Cap, and of how useful a person she might prove to her in a little

scheme which had been busy in her brain, and which through her means she now thought she should have a better chance of carrying out than she had ever hoped to have.

CHAPTER II.

LOUNGING in one of the most luxurious arm-chairs in the drawing room at Beechdale is Effie Graham. Something she calls 'work,' soft muslin and braid, lies in her lap, but she is not working. With her needle between her white slender fingers she is pricking a moss rosebud she holds in her hand—with no object, for no purpose. She evidently is not aware she is doing it—her thoughts are far away, not with that pretty bud she is torturing and spoiling; she is either building castles or mourning over their ruins.

She has come to spend the day with Mrs. Martyn. The long summer days have passed away, and autumn, with its chilly mornings and evenings, and its bright, often hot days, has set in. Mr. Martyn has his house full of shooting friends, and they are out from early morning till seven o'clock dinner, coming home in time to dress for dinner, eat it, and yawn afterwards till bedtime. It is very dull for Mrs. Martyn, and she is glad to have a nice female friend to come and help pass the time. Effie she asks most frequently; she is so fond of her, so fond of her pretty face, of her merry, childish, joyous nature, though she does not think that she is as merry and funny as she used to be; she makes long pauses now in the midst of her gayest chatter, and gives

wrong answers to questions, and is altered somehow altogether, paler and almost at times sad-looking, but if possible still more beautiful. Mrs. Martyn, who was playing over a new opera at the other end of the room, stopped as she finished one of the airs, and asked Effie how she liked it.

‘Like what, dear?’ she asked.

‘Why, Effie,’ said Mrs. Martyn rising and coming to her, ‘is it possible that you did not hear that, that you are deaf even to music? Here was I flattering myself that you were charmed by my dulcet strains, and to my horror I find you have not heard a note.’

‘I did not know you were edifying me, or I would have made a point of listening,’ answered Effie. ‘I thought you were only amusing yourself, and I——’

‘Wandered away into dreamland—eh, Effie? Dear child, you do wander away very often now; what is it, where is it?’

A blush brighter than the rose she held covered her face as she answered, ‘I won’t say I don’t know, because that would not be true. My thoughts do wander strangely of late; they have become most unruly, almost past my control; they follow one leader nearly always now.’

‘May I guess?’ asked Mrs. Martyn, smiling.

‘Oh yes! if you like; I am not obliged to say whether you are right or wrong.’

‘No, not obliged; but you are so truthful, Effie, that you will not say no if I guess right. So I think it is scarcely fair. I will say nothing, only wait until you tell

me yourself, and then I will say if my guess was right.'

'Thank you, I think that is better. I never could understand why it is thought no harm to deny what you know to be true, simply because you do not wish it known. If one's secret is guessed, it is guessed, and there is an end of the matter; to deny it, is to me as much "lying" as any other form of the vice.'

'Certainly. A girl I knew was privately engaged to a gentleman whom I had met once or twice at a friend's. I discovered it, and mentioned it gently to her. She indignantly denied the charge, and was married to him six weeks afterwards.'

'Oh, yes! it's supposed to be unlady-

like to confess an attachment. I would not proclaim it certainly, but I would not deny it, for I should be more ashamed to tell a falsehood than to acknowledge an affection for a worthy object.'

'Quite right, Effie. Well, I sincerely hope that the "worthy object," whoever he may be, will warmly reciprocate your affection, and that I shall see my pretty Effie some day a happy wife and mother.'

Effie only sighed in answer, and at this moment the door opened, and baby, in a very stiff white frock and broad cherry-coloured sash, tottered in with a crow of triumph. The accomplishment of walking having only been acquired within a day or two, her delight at her own performance had not yet subsided, and she was in

consequence a most anxious and somewhat fatiguing companion, as she struggled manfully to get down whenever anyone attempted to nurse her; and when she succeeded, managed to fall, and frighten the nurse and herself to death, more especially if the nurse for the time being happened to be an inexperienced young lady.

‘I’ll never attempt to take that mite again,’ said Effie, as the child toddled towards her, attracted as most children were by her bright, beautiful face. ‘I thought I had killed her this morning; how she did yell.’

‘Dead children don’t often yell, Effie, do they?’ said Mrs. Martyn, laughing, and picking up the child to smother her with kisses. ‘You may go, nurse,’ she said, as

Stedman stood holding open the drawing-room door, 'we will keep Miss Baby a little while.'

'Very well, ma'am; shall I come for her presently or will you ring?' she asked in her soft, low tones.

'I will ring. Oh! how heavy you are, you dear thing,' continued Mrs. Martyn; 'you must sit on the ground. There, there's mamma's keys and the footstool to play with—ample amusement.'

'For three minutes,' said Effie. 'My dear Mrs. Martyn, she'll scramble up presently by anything she can lay hold of, and then down she'll go on her nose. I really think children ought to be shut up till they're of a respectable age, and have more respect for their foreheads and noses.'

‘ Dear little things ! I think it’s so pretty to see them trying to walk,’ said Mrs. Martyn, stooping to unloose baby’s grasp of the velvet table-cover which was threatening destruction to an exquisite statuette on the centre of the table.

‘ Pretty ! I think it’s agonising ; it fills me with the same sensations as it would to be under a pillar or column which whobbles.’

‘ Which euphonious and graphic expression means—’ asked Mrs. Martyn, laughingly.

‘ Means “ tottering ” or “ shaking,” or whatever other word you like to substitute,’ said Effie. ‘ Now look, she’s up and off, and in two seconds she’ll be down,’ she continued, pointing to baby, who after several unsuccessful attempts had at length got on

her feet and was staggering along towards the rug, on which was a stuffed fox with large red eyes intended for a footstool, and which was the child's great delight.

'Oh! she'll get there all right. Steady, baby, steady,' said Mrs. Martyn, coming close behind her; and baby, contrary to Effie's predictions, landed safely beside the fox.

'How does Rita get on?' asked Effie, when baby, having kept them both sufficiently employed for some time, was restored to nurse. 'I never see baby without thinking of her. How fond she was of it.'

'Although' in her passion she nearly killed it,' answered Mrs. Martyn. 'Little torment! I was so glad to get rid of her; but I am afraid George will have her back

again ; he fancies she looks ill and unhappy. She spent one day at home last week, and seemed more odd and miserable than ever, but I did not see that she looked ill.'

'Poor little child, I always pity her. I dare say she has brought it on herself, but it is very piteous to be no one's pet—to feel that on earth not one human being cares if one lives or dies. Fancy me without my dear silly old dad. Why, bless him, he thinks there's not my equal upon earth, and has indulged my every whim since I can first remember.'

'And yet you would not scruple to leave him for some one else—eh, Effie?'

'Well, that is a sort of natural absurdity and form of ingratitude to one's parents which most people are guilty of,' said Effie, with an attempt at a laugh.

‘Yes, and no experience of the sorrows of matrimony which we see around us serves as a beacon to warn us of the quicksand. I believe marriage is a mistake,’ said Mrs. Martyn, sighing.

‘Hush ! No treason against King George,’ said Effie.

‘Oh ! my husband’s well enough—better than most men, I believe ; but Effie, my dear, they are such disappointing creatures at the best. One leaves home and parents and all we have loved and valued from our infancy for them, and then——’

‘And then we are proud and happy and contented in the one love which we coveted above all others, in the knowledge that we are, if nothing higher or better, the slave of one whom we would rather serve

humbly for ever than be the empress of the world.'

'Effie,' said Mrs. Martyn, 'I cannot bear to hear you talk so. You are dreaming that idle dream so many have dreamt before you, and from which they have had so rude a wakening. No one on earth is worth such love. Marry, child, if you think you should prefer a wedded life to single blessedness, but remember that you are only marrying a human being full of faults and human weaknesses, and with that fault, stronger so much in men than women, intolerable selfishness. Remember, Effie, that bright and courteous and charming as the man may be in society, in his home he makes no effort to overcome his whims—his peculiarities. These his wife

must bear daily, hourly. If he is worried and fretted by others, his wife must bear his ill-humour. If his cook spoils his dinner, his wife must bear the blame. If she is ill, he is worried, and she must exert herself to come down stairs, for the house is not right without her. If——'

'Stop! stop!' said Effie, laughingly, stopping her ears. 'Listen to me a moment. Without love such burdens would be impossible to bear; but Cupid waves a magic wand. See how he will change at one stroke all you have said. My husband's "whims and peculiarities!" How delightful to think no one understands him as I do. Anywhere else but at home he would be unhappy, he would be polite and courteous because he is a gentleman, but

he would be uncomfortable. With me he is happy, because I humour and indulge him—"if he is worried and fretted by others," how enchanting to feel that I can comfort him—that he comes to me to throw off his ill-humour because he knows I love him so that I shall not heed it; that I am one with him, and that he need wear no mask before me. If I am ill, how pleasant to know that he is counting the moments for me to be well and about again—that I am not only missed, but wanted. Compare this with the lonely life of single blessedness, and I think you will admit its vast superiority.'

Mrs. Martyn had listened with a half-smile on her face to Effie's reply, and at its conclusion she said,

‘If you will repeat all this from your heart two years after you are married, I will confess myself beaten.’

‘I will never marry without believing that I shall be able to do so. . I am not perfect myself. I am not going to look for perfection in a husband, but I have great faith in the power of love. No man is proof against it, and I do believe that a marriage sanctified by love must be a happy one sooner or later.’

‘And what, Effie, must this love be founded on, esteem, admiration, flattered vanity, or what?’

‘Ah! that I cannot tell you. I should not stay to ask from whence it came. The worthiness of the object appears to me to have very little to do with it; the truest,

strongest loves have been those which have sprung up suddenly, unasked, unsought, unsuspected. I sympathise very much with those lines—

I know not, I ask not, if there's guilt in that heart,
I but know that *I* love thee whatever thou art.

‘Very romantic, Effie,’ said Mrs. Martyn.
‘And very silly you would add, I dare say; but I read a book the other day which gives my idea exactly of a true love. A girl falls in love—it is called “falling in love,” you see, because it is supposed to be a sudden thing—with a man who is leading a wild vagabond sort of life, living by his wits, in short, through unfortunate circumstances; doing nothing positively wrong, nothing dishonourable, but not walking in the measured road set out by the world as the

right road. Her friends object to their marriage. Well, she waits patiently for years until she is her own mistress, and then marries him ; knowing that happiness, what the world calls happiness, can never be hers. But she can be of use to him. She can save him from going lower. She can be his stay and comfort. That is to her better than any joy the world can give her, and she is content to make this sacrifice. That is love as I read it, silly and romantic as you may think it ; and unless I could feel such, trust me, I would never marry.'

.' Hark ! ' said Mrs. Martyn, jumping up, ' here come the gentlemen I do believe ; they must have had a bad day to return so soon. Why, my dear,' she said, as her

husband entered the room, 'what has brought you back?'

'Oh! we got tired to death; we could not see a thing within shot. They're not all come back. Wyman and I gave up an hour ago and went for the second post. It's not so very early though, Emmy; half-past five.'

'Is it so late as that? Any letters did you get?'

'Yes; I have not looked at them though yet,' and he flung himself down in one of the chairs, and taking some letters from his pocket was about to read them.

'You've beautiful boots for the drawing-room, George,' said Mrs. Martyn.

'Arn't they stunners? Wyman was too considerate for your feelings; he has gone straight up to his room to change.'

‘Praiseworthy person; do you go too.’

‘Very well; then I shall take the letters with me, and your curiosity won’t be gratified as to their contents or who they’re from.’

‘Tell me first where they are from, and then I will say whether I care to hear their contents.’

‘One is from Cecil Wentworth, I can see.’

Mrs. Martyn glanced at Effie, but she was very busily working.

‘Well, you may just tell me what he says, and then go and get rid of those horrid boots.’

‘Oh! I may, may I? Well he says,’ he continued, opening the letter and glancing down it, ‘he says—

“Dear Martyn,—Circumstances have

occurred which induce me to think I ought to see you—‘eh! what’s this? he’s mysterious.’ I could run down from Saturday till Monday if you can put me up, or could you run up to me, which you like.

“Yours in haste,

“C. W.”

‘What does all this mean, Emmy, eh?’

‘I have not the faintest idea. What can it be about?’

‘Well, he must come here, I can’t go away. Fanshawe goes on Friday; he can have his room, can’t he?’

‘Yes, he can have his room. It’s about Robert and Nina I shouldn’t wonder. I was so angry when she told me all that foolish story I could not fully understand it; but you may depend on it, as I have since

written and told her, that he knows all about that foolish affair here, and that he was in earnest when he cross-questioned her so.'

Martyn glanced at Effie as his wife spoke, but Mrs. Martyn had spoken in very low tones, and Effie appeared absorbed in her work and taking no notice of their conversation, but when Mr. Martyn left the room to remove the dirty boots according to his wife's suggestion, Effie said—

'Did a silly rumour about Miss Elwyn and some man ever reach you after she left, Mrs. Martyn? I have been going to ask you many times.'

'No: no rumour has reached me; but I know my sister has a foolish attachment, and that the gentleman came here.'

‘And that Cecil Wentworth met him in the wood, and threatened to shoot him if he pursued Miss Elwyn any more. Is that true?’ asked Effie, eagerly.

‘Not in the least; where could you have heard such a story?’

‘From Mrs. Hammond; she was full of it the other day.’

‘That hateful woman; she’s always concocting something.’

‘It appears that the gentleman was driven to the station in Collins the grocer’s cart, and Mrs. Hammond’s curiosity being greatly excited at the advent of a stranger, she took an opportunity of enquiring all about it from Mrs. Collins. According to Mrs. Hammond’s tale, she told her that it was a gentleman who had something to do

with Miss Elwyn, and that he had told her his life had been threatened by a gentleman staying at Beechdale, and that he must return to London immediately. Mrs. Hammond, repeating the tale to me, said it could be no other than Cecil Wentworth, as he was the only person then staying here.'

'Foolish thing! There is, as usual in such cases, just enough truth to hang a story on. Nina did see this gentleman, and Cecil Wentworth, I believe, met one or both of them, but there was no word exchanged between them as far as I know; but I felt sure there would be some idle chatter about it, and have been worried ever since. Living out of the village and mixing so little with the people in it,

I seldom hear any gossip, and never encourage it by gossiping myself.'

'Mrs. Hammond will make you hear her whether you will or no,' said Effie.

'Oh yes! she's my pet abomination; but I always cut her remarkably short when I am forced to meet her.'

'Then you do not think there is any feeling for Miss Elwyn on Mr. Wentworth's part,' said Effie, somewhat hesitatingly.

'None in the least; I should rather say he disliked her; he is fearfully particular about women, and has, I think, some ideal in his mind which will never be realised. One thing, his "beloved" must be *tall*, so Nina certainly has not a chance; moreover, poor child, her own silly little

heart is gone, and so *he* has not a chance even if he wished it.'

There was a pause after this for a time. Each lady seemed occupied with her own thoughts, until the gong announcing that it was time to dress for dinner roused them from their reveries.

'Are the men all in, I wonder?' said Mrs. Martyn. 'I suppose not; it will be the old story, waiting for dinner. Framboise will give warning to a certainty. I must go to George, and remind him to answer Cecil's letter. They have put you in the blue room, Effie, I think; Stedman will come to you if you want assistance.'

'Thank you, Mrs. Martyn; my toilet is so easily accomplished I never employ a maid.'

‘Carrying out the old proverb “beauty when unadorned,” &c.’

‘Yes, that’s it of course,’ said Effie, and she entered the room prepared for her and sat down in the first chair that presented itself, to think.

Mrs. Martyn was just about to close her door when Stedman prevented her with the words ‘May I speak to you a moment?’

‘Oh! certainly, Stedman; nothing the matter with baby, is there?’

‘No, ma’am, there is nothing the matter with her to-night,’ and Stedman cautiously and quietly closed the door.

‘Well, tell me what it is, Stedman, for I am rather pressed for time. Mr. Martyn likes no one to keep the dinner waiting

but himself,' and Mrs. Martyn tried to laugh as she spoke.

'I will not detain you, ma'am, longer than I can help, but I think it is important that you should know something.'

'Go on by all means, without further preface.'

'Well, ma'am, about three weeks after Miss Rita went to school I was walking out with dear baby when a very strange-looking woman came up to me and asked me if I was from Beechdale, and if baby belonged there. I told her I saw no reason why I should say who I was to her or where I came from, or where the baby belonged, and walked on; but she followed me, and worried me so that to get rid of her I told her I was the nurse and baby was

your daughter and the sooner she walked away and left talking to me the better. She was very angry and very insulting, but I did not care; I would say no more to her. She has been here twice since, and the last time, this very morning, she begged me to let her take baby and show her some ornaments and tinselly things she had got in her basket, but of course I would not; then she stooped over to me and whispered, "Tell your mistress baby has got a deadly enemy; she must pay me handsome, and I'll tell who it is. I've been asked to take her away, but I wouldn't, the pretty dear, no, not for untold gold." That, ma'am, was the woman's words, I do assure you; and she looked so evil that I really cannot bear it another night without telling you.'

‘Oh! nonsense, Stedman; some silly drunken thing I suppose. You had better keep in the grounds for a day or two, and I will tell Mr. Martyn to mention her to the policeman; he will see that she does not annoy you again. What deadly enemy can that innocent little darling have?’

‘Well, I don’t know, ma’am. I dare say it’s very wrong of me to have such thoughts, but Miss Rita was so strange last time she was home, and Maria says the other nurse was always putting it into her head that baby stood in her way, that I’ve been thinking whether she could have bribed that old creature in any way to do baby a mischief.’

‘Stedman, what folly have you got in your head? Pray put such nonsensical ideas

away at once. It's only in sensational novels such things occur ; in this prosy age we do not hear of any such tragic occurrences. Rita is a strange, odd child, but she is much too fond of baby to wish her any harm.'

'Well, ma'am, I only thought it was my duty to tell you,' said Stedman.

'Oh! certainly, my good girl; you were perfectly right, and I will have this old woman watched ; but pray do not associate Miss Rita with her. Now run away back to your little charge, and let me dress, and do not disquiet yourself any more.'

But notwithstanding her thus calmly dismissing the subject, it did worry her much, and she eagerly recounted it to Mr. Martyn.

'Oh! it's only some stupid old thing that

would try to get money out of Stedman or us by frightening us. She must be watched, and sent to the treadmill. There's nothing in it depend on it,' he answered ; ' I should never give it another thought.'

But Mrs. Martyn did give it many thoughts, and that night could get no quiet sleep for dismal dreams of her child being carried away by old witch-like women or murdered by creatures with faces like Rita's. She was thankful when the morning came, that she might go to the nursery, and with the dear little fat arms round her neck, and the baby lips pressed to hers, assure herself that her treasure was safe.

CHAPTER III.

SATURDAY came, and with it Cecil Wentworth. Mr. Martyn and his wife had not attempted to speculate on what he wanted to communicate, feeling so sure that it was connected in some way with Nina and Robert Ayrton. Martyn drove himself to the station to meet him, and directly they were in the dog-cart he said, 'Well, old fellow, what's up? What have you got to tell us—going to be married?'

'Oh! dear, no; nothing half so foolish,' said Cecil.

‘What then? You have greatly excited our curiosity. It must be something important to bring you down here, and by Jove, now I come to look at you, you look awfully seedy. And what’s the matter here?’ he continued, pointing to Cecil’s arm, which was in a sling.

‘Oh! that’s only a troublesome inflammation, or something of no consequence, only that it has in a measure to do with what I have come down to tell. I thought it was so much better to see you than write.’

‘Well, let’s have it. I came myself on purpose that you should tell me as soon as possible. The missis is a little fidgetty, thinking it has to do with Nina; so I thought I’d hear it first, and then I could

tell her quietly, you know. I suppose she's bolted with that scamp Robert Ayrton.'

'No. He is out of England again, I believe; but the fact is her name is coupled with his everywhere from the fact having got abroad, how I know not, that she met him here clandestinely in the wood.'

'Well, yes; she did do that stupidly enough, I admit. But how the dickens has that travelled to town?'

'How do the most absurd things travel and accumulate as they roll, like a snow-ball, till from the size of an egg it grows as big as the dome of St. Paul's. I only know that when I left here for Farrant's, at a dinner party there, I heard the most outrageous tale about them from young Wyndham, who told me he had it

from a Mrs. Anderson, sister of a Mrs. Cavendish, who has taken Westfield Park.'

'Yes, we know her quite well—dined there last week,' said Martyn, leaning forward as he spoke to take a fly off the horse's neck with his whip. 'Where on earth did she get hold of the story?'

'That I cannot say; I only know it was a most exaggerated one, and I strongly denied it, and requested Wyndham not to spread it; but to my annoyance and astonishment, at a party the other night, I heard the same tale with still further additions. I then made up my mind to call on Wyndham, and try again to persuade him to stop as far as he could this scandal, which was getting serious, and would injure the young lady if persevered in. He foolishly lost his

temper, and I am afraid I followed suit. He said he would put me out of the room and kick me down stairs if I did not go at once. I said I should not go until I had finished what I had to say, whereupon he rushed at me, intending to try to put his threat in execution, which I prevented by quietly depositing him in a corner, and walking out of the room before he had recovered his equilibrium or his astonishment.'

'Then I suppose you're summoned for an assault, and this whole delightful business will get in the papers.'

'No, I have heard nothing more of it. I think Wyndham, who is really not a bad fellow, is ashamed of himself by this time, feels he was wrong and I right; but he's not likely to come and say so. He

will simply let the matter drop, and cut me next time we meet; which he is quite welcome to do.'

'Well, I'm sure it's very kind of you, Wentworth, taking up poor Nina's cudgels in this way. It is not as though you cared for the girl, or she was any relation. It's what I call confoundedly disinterested, don't you know?'

Wentworth murmured some reply, and Martyn continued—

'But how about this arm? What's that got to do with this story?'

'Why, in putting that naughty boy into the corner,' answered Cecil, 'I somehow cut my finger (showing the folly of wearing finery) with my ring. I took no notice of it at first, and it revenged itself on me

for my neglect by becoming so troublesome that I was compelled to send for a doctor, and it has been lanced and poulticed, and gone through a variety of such pleasing performances, and it is still useless—compelling me to do the interesting, and have my food cut up for me.'

'Bless my heart, what a very vexatious business altogether it is. I wish that young dog Ayrton had been at the bottom of the sea before he ever saw Nina. Little scamp. What she can see in him I can't think; he hasn't a redeeming point.'

'Honesty,' interrupted Cecil. 'He has paid me the sum he borrowed, as he promised. That you will admit is honest in word and deed.'

'Has he? Well I am sure you may con-

sider yourself lucky. I 'should think you are the first person he ever paid that he wasn't made to pay.'

'Yes, I found it on my return from here at my office. How long it had been there I don't know. The sum was merely enclosed 'with grateful thanks.' I saw him in the wood and he seemed awfully frightened, and bolted as hard as he could. I suspect he rushed back to London and sent the money at once to the office.'

'Yes, young scoundrel; he would never have paid it if you hadn't seen him, you may depend on it. Oh! he's a thorough rascal. But here we are,' said Martyn as he reached the gates of Beechdale. 'I'm afraid Emmy will be awfully worried about all this, but it can't be helped.'

Mrs. Martyn came out in the hall to meet them.

‘Glad to see you, Mr. Wentworth. But what is this—an invalid?’

‘Yes, I’ve brought you a wounded soldier, Emmy; you must take care of him. Come along, old fellow, in here. I declare a fire looks quite cheery; the evenings grow chilly. Sit down and have a warm before you go up stairs. Here, where’s the sherry, Emmy? Ah! have a glass. Give me the keys, I’ll get it.’

‘No, why should you? Mantle can get it whilst you warm your fingers,’ and, ringing the bell, Mrs. Martyn desired the servant to bring glasses and the sherry.

‘Are the gentlemen in, Mantle?’

‘No, sir, they hare not,’ said Mantle,

going up to the fire and putting on a log of wood, and glancing round the room to see that everything was as it should be, as he always did every time he entered it. Now a blind struck him as having been crookedly drawn up; he went to set it right, treading softly and lightly over the carpet as though the bunches of flowers on it were real and he feared to crush them, and as he finished arranging the blind he turned to his master and in his blandest and mildest accents said,

‘ The gentlemen hare just coming, sir. I can see them a walking hover the meadow.’

‘ Oh! that’s all right, Mantle ; here you may take the sherry. Queer stick that fellow is, to be sure,’ he said, as the man closed the door in the quietest way.

‘It is the same you had when I was here before, is it not?’ said Wentworth.

‘Oh! yes; I would not part with him for a gold mine; he’s a glorious servant, but he’s such a strange animal, so quiet and precise, and every word he utters seems to be such a fatigue to him. I could get through a column of the “Times” newspaper while he’s getting out one sentence. Now Emmy looks as though she was dying to know what’s the matter with your arm, so let’s tell her at once. He’s had such a bad finger that he’s been ordered to carry the hand in a sling. The rest I’ll tell her up stairs while we are dressing,’ he said in a lower tone.

‘It has made you look quite delicate, Mr. Wentworth. I hope our beautiful air will do you good.’

‘He won’t stay long enough to give it a chance, I fear,’ said Martyn. ‘Off again on Monday ain’t you?’

‘Oh! yes; I ought not to be away now, but I thought seeing you and talking better than writing.’

‘Certainly, certainly, we will talk it all over after dinner—a fellow always sees things in a better light after dinner. There goes the gong, let’s go and make ourselves pretty; the North bedroom for Cecil, is it not Emily?’

‘Yes, the little room on the left hand side of the stairs.’

Whilst they were dressing Martyn told his wife the purport of Wentworth’s visit. ‘I don’t know what’s to be done, it’s getting serious,’ he said. ‘If this story is to

go the round of London, painted up and improved as it appears to be, Nina must retire into private life.'

'Oh! the best way is to "live it down," George,' answered his wife. 'There is no untruth however glaring, no calumny however malicious, that a quiet persistence in one's own right course will not eventually expose or crush. I am sorry Mr. Wentworth has interfered in the matter, it will only give the world something else to talk of; his name will be mixed with hers next.'

'Its deuced annoying though, Emily, to have a girl that belongs to one made remarks of everywhere in this way. I wonder what they do say. I must get Wentworth to tell me all the particulars by-and-bye.'

‘It is as annoying to us as it is to her of course; but nothing will stop it so effectually as not noticing it; let the thing starve, and it must die; excited denials and angry retorts only feed the reptile scandal till it becomes a monster,’ said Mrs. Martyn.

‘I dare say you’re right, but I must own I have an irresistible desire to kick every one who invents or repeats an ill-natured story.’

‘My dear George,’ answered Mrs. Martyn laughing, ‘if your impulses were gratified, you would soon want a new pair of legs, they would very quickly be worn out in such service. How shall you manage to get an opportunity of speaking to Cecil Wentworth?’

‘Why neither Bell nor Twyman smoke,

they'll go to bed and we will sit up, and over a pipe have the whole story.'

'Well, pray tell him that my advice is that the matter should be left alone, that I thank him for all his kind intentions towards my sister but that he compromises her more by his interference.'

'All right, I'll tell him what you say, but I think Mr. Cecil is one of those gentlemen who are averse to revise their opinion,' and Martyn ran laughing downstairs.

It was the small hours before Martyn sought his pillow that night, so much had he to hear from his friend. He told him of Wyndham's first exaggerated tale at Farrant's, and then of the still worse one he had heard at the party, 'and positively, I assure you,' he continued, 'at the club, I was asked

by a man who knew I had been staying down here, if it was true that a young lady here was engaged to a 'ticket-of-leave man.'

'Well, Emily's advice is, let the matter rest, and it will die a natural death.'

'I intend to do no more than I have; that was my object in coming here, it is for you to act now. I have placed the facts before you, it is of course no business of mine.'

'Oh! my dear fellow, don't think us ungrateful, we are obliged to you no end for your interest in the matter, but Emily seems to think the thing is more likely to be dropped and forgotten, than if a stir was made about it. The young scamp is gone, I hope most devoutly, never to return, and

when the gossips find Nina going into society the same as ever, and no fuss is made, the whole foolish nonsense will be forgotten.'

'My mother purposes calling on Mrs. Elwyn,' said Wentworth, after a short pause, 'and inviting her and Miss Elwyn to a dinner party on Thursday next. I wonder if they will go.'

'I dare say they will, though Nina hates going out. I say, old fellow, you look awfully seedy. Does your hand hurt you? Here, let me make you a stiff tumbler of grog.'

'No, no, thank you. I'm forbidden all stimulants. It is wonderfully painful to-night.'

'Well, then, of course you want some-

thing to keep you up to the mark. Don't tell me—I shall make you have something good ; you'll sleep as well again. What muffs and humbugs doctors are ! Go and suddenly stop a fellow who's been accustomed to his six or seven glasses of wine a day, and tell him he's not to have a drop, when he's suffering pain, which makes it necessary he should have something extra to support it. Cut your doctor and listen to Dr. Martyn. He prescribes one glass of good grog. You had no wine at dinner. Hang it, you'll be brought to the brink of the grave.'

Cecil laughed as he answered, 'Do you consider wine as necessary to a man's existence then ? I believe we should be a great deal better if we never took it at all.'

‘Perhaps so, if we had never begun it, but when a man’s lived to your time of life and always taken it, his system has got accustomed to it and he can’t do without it. So there now, you drink that up and tell me you don’t feel better. The fact is, when the doctors say none they don’t mean it. A surgeon told me once, “We are obliged to say none, and then our patients take two or three glasses instead of six or seven; while if we said one or two they’d probably take their usual quantity. So drink it up without fear. And now I want you to tell me about Farrant. What sort of a fellow is he ?’

‘A charming fellow, I think. I have known him for years and am very fond of him,’ said Cecil.

‘Hasn’t he got a mad sister or cousin shut up in his house? I heard something about it the other day where I was dining.’

‘A match to Miss Elwyn’s romance, I suppose, with about as much truth in it.’

‘Oh! I dare say, but what is it?’

‘He told me all about it this time. I never heard it before, though I have known him so long; but since our Eton days we have not been much together. It’s a curious story; he’s a strange odd fellow, but good to the back-bone.’

‘It is true then.’

‘True that he has a sister living in the house with him, yes, but she is not mad, unless an evil temper may be called madness. No, the facts are these. Charlie was an only child, and petted and indulged

as most only children are, until he was eight years old, when he lost his mother, and his father very soon married again. At the end of a year a little girl was born, and the once spoiled and petted boy was nobody ; the baby was everyone's idol and Charlie became as much neglected as he had been formerly indulged, until he was glad to be sent away to school, and finally to Eton. He dreaded, he says, his holidays, and would far rather have remained at school. Naturally he entertained a somewhat unpleasant feeling towards the child who seemed to have robbed him of all the attention and affection once lavished on him, and as they grew older the feuds between them were incessant. One day during his Christmas holidays he had brought

into their playroom some boiling water to melt his glue, with which he was going to construct something for the child herself, in hopes of conciliating her, for she was in a very bad humour ; but instead of succeeding in his amiable purpose, the young lady appeared to grow each moment more aggravating, till his own temper was roused, and in a rage he seized the jug of boiling water and threw it full in her face. Her violent shrieks of agony summoned mother, father, and servants ; he was ordered to go to his room and remain there until he was sent for, which he did. His meals were brought to him regularly, and for a week he remained a prisoner. At the end of that time his father came to him and said, " Charlie, you may be now at

liberty, your holidays have nearly expired, I hope you will enjoy the rest of them with the knowledge that you have rendered your sister blind for life.”’

‘Bless my soul,’ said Martyn, ‘but it wasn’t so, was it?’

‘Too true,’ continued Wentworth, ‘the water had scalded the eyes and so injured the sight; the poor little girl was incurably blind. At the end of that year her mother died, and the poor sightless girl became still more the father’s idol. When he, too, found his last moments approaching, he called Charlie to him, and solemnly confided Adeline to his care. “You have made her helpless and dependent, swear to me on my death-bed that you will take care of her as long as she lives; never leave

her, personally watch over her, so long as you both shall live." She herself, having refused to leave her father from the moment he was taken ill, heard the words ; and poor Charlie says he shall never forget the way in which she stretched her arms out to him, and the sad wailing cry she uttered as their father died, saying—

“ Charlie, take me, love me and care for me always—he said you were.” She has lived with him ever since. He would never marry whilst she lived for fear she should not be happy ; his own remorse for his share in her calamity, besides his promise to her father, makes him feel that he ought to sacrifice himself for her. She has a fearful temper still, only the thought of the injury he did her, and his own

wonderful self-control enables him to bear with her at all, poor fellow ; the skeleton in his closet is indeed a ghastly one.'

'What a very uncomfortable story ; have a little more to drink, won't you ?' said Martyn.

'No, thank you,' answered Wentworth, 'no more. It is a sad tale, but a good one too ; the self-inflicted penance of the man is so fine. She will not be seen by anyone, so a wing of his house is given up to her, which she occupies when friends are in the house ; but she is passionately fond of music, and when any of his guests sing or play he takes care that she shall hear it. He gives up one hour to her every evening, let who will be with him, and never passes a night out of the house because she cannot bear to be left.'

‘Poor creature, he is indeed to be pitied; but he’s very well off, isn’t he?’ asked Martyn.

‘Oh yes! he’s decidedly what you call a rich man, and his great literary and scientific tastes are a great comfort and support to him. Second marriages, where there are any children by the first, are a great mistake.’

‘I’m afraid they are,’ said Martyn, rather dolefully.

‘I beg your pardon, Martyn—I really forgot,’ stammered Wentworth.

‘Oh, all right, old fellow—it is always awkward; the first lot, somehow, never seem to get on with the second. Rita has been a sad trouble to me ever since I married again.’

‘Ah! how is poor little Rita?’ asked Wentworth.

‘She’s very well, I believe; but I don’t think she’s very happy. She’s at school.’

‘At school!’ echoed Wentworth.

‘Yes, there was some row or other up stairs, and Emily made such a point of her being sent away that I yielded, but I believe I was wrong.’

‘I don’t think girls’ schools are good things certainly, as a rule I believe they learn more harm than good; at least, that is my mother’s opinion. She says if she had had fifty girls not one of them should have gone to school.’

‘No, but what are you do to with a poor motherless thing, like Rita? She gets so wild and unruly no one can manage her; she must be sent somewhere.’

‘ Oh yes, I dare say it’s all right. I don’t pretend to set my judgment on such a matter against yours or Mrs. Martyn’s, but what little I saw of the child made me think that she was very peculiar, very clever, and would require very skilful handling, which I should think you would not get in a school.’

‘ Perhaps not. I think it will end in my bringing her home, and trying to find some clever sensible governess to live here altogether, and take charge of her ; that poor Miss Temple was an awful muff.’

‘ Was she ? I never saw her. Well, we must turn in, I think, Martyn, it’s getting late.’

‘ Yes, it is, but I have not hurried, for I could see you were in pain, and I thought

your night would probably be a long one.

‘Thank you, that is why I look so “seedy,” the stupid thing keeps me awake; I have not had a good night since it was done.’

‘I hope my prescription will benefit you, old fellow. Good night.’

‘Thank you, I hope it will. Good night. Oh! one question I have not asked you. Is Miss Elwyn aware that this foolish affair is so talked of?’

‘I don’t know; I believe not. We heard from her a little while ago, and she never mentioned it. She knows it is not a favourite topic with us, and never alludes to it if she can avoid it. I wish some nice fellow would take a fancy to her and carry her off; but she’s not every one’s money.’

Nina's nothing till you know her. Now if she had got Effie Graham's beauty there might be a chance for her—wonderfully pretty she is, to be sure. I say, Wentworth, she'd do for you.'

'Thank you, no ; I don't think she's in my style.'

'Too rapid do you think, eh ? She's quite altered, I assure you. Meek as a Methodist. I can't think what's come to her.'

'I'm too particular to find a wife, I'm afraid, Martyn.'

'Yes, Emily says you're a woman hater.'

'No, no, not quite that, I love and honour a true woman, but there are so few left ; all the women I could love are married.'

'That's awkward, certainly, in this country.'

'Yes, I feel with young Sheridan, who

when advised to take a wife said, "Certainly, whose wife shall I take?" for I must own I have seen no single specimen to delight me, they seem to me as though they had no intellect whatever. You can talk of nothing they understand, and they only "giggle" if you speak of anything but the last new comic song or the next ball ; and their idea of literature goes no farther than a modern novel of questionable sentiment, and the Fashionable Intelligence in the "Court Journal" or the "Lady's Newspaper." I declare to you the other day a girl told me she had been to the theatre to see a play ; she did not know who it was by or what it was about, only she knew there was a ghost in it that was awfully jolly, the scenery was beautiful and it was something

about a girl drowning herself whom she supposed was mad.'

'Forgive us! she did not mean "Hamlet,"' said Martyn, bursting into a loud laugh.

'She did indeed. Imagine marrying a woman who could call the ghost in Hamlet "awfully jolly;" but we must go, good night old fellow.'

'Good night once more. I declare I shall burst out laughing and startle Emily if it comes into my head again. An "awfully jolly ghost." I declare it's the most absurd thing I ever knew. Can I do anything for you in the valleting line, old fellow?'

'Oh no, thank you, I can manage,' and the gentlemen betook themselves to their several rooms as the church clock struck two.

CHAPTER IV.

NOTWITHSTANDING their late separation over night, the friends met in the morning in very good time; but Cecil still complained of his hand.

‘ You will not venture to church, I suppose, Mr. Wentworth,’ asked Mrs. Martyn.

‘ Oh yes, I shall; it will be no better for remaining at home, and I have a pleasant recollection of your good vicar.’

‘ Yes, he’s very nice, is he not? and he is as good out of his pulpit as in it, thoroughly in earnest.’

‘Great praise for anyone, I think, Mrs. Martyn.’

‘To be thoroughly in earnest, you mean; well, perhaps it is so few of us are really in earnest about anything now-a-days. I think we must be starting; are you coming, George?’

‘Yes, if you like, but I rather prefer the afternoon.’ So Cecil and Mr. and Mrs. Martyn, with one of the sportsmen, Mr. Bell, proceeded together to church. Cecil did not labour under the impression that to lounge about in church as if he was at the opera, stare at the best looking girls, and whisper incessantly to his neighbour, was the proper conduct for a Christian gentleman; and his grave serious attention was noticed by one whose devotions were cer-

tainly much disturbed by his presence in church. But he never saw her, never thought of her till the conclusion of the sermon, when the congregation rose; and then for the first time he noticed the beautiful face, and fancied, as the eyes which had been fixed on him were hastily turned away, a blush mounted to that fair hair parted in the glossy braids he so much admired. At the gate of the church, as they went away, they met her, and this time he was sure it was no fancy; a deep blush mantled all her face, and she scarcely answered his greeting. Cecil was no coxcomb, but he could not help noticing it, and wondering as he noticed; he fancied he saw Mrs. Martyn exchange looks with her husband, and it puzzled him all the way home. His hand had been so painful

during service, that on his arrival at Beechdale he requested to be excused luncheon, and went up to his room to lie down. The rest of the party had scarcely finished theirs when a little note was brought to Mrs. Martyn, which she read with a smile, and putting it into her pocket said,

‘Tell Miss Graham I will come in presently.’

‘What is it, Emily?’ asked Mr. Martyn.

‘Oh! nothing particular; Effie asks a question. I will run in after church and see her.’ And so she did, finding her in her favourite position on a stool at her father’s feet, with her head on his knee.

She jumped up as Mrs. Martyn was announced, and welcomed her with a smile and blush.

‘I ran in for a moment just to answer your question,’ began Mrs. Martyn; but Effie put up a warning finger, and pointed to her father.

Mrs. Martyn continued without apparently noticing her sign, ‘to answer your question; I shall be delighted to have you again to spend the day, if Mr. Graham can spare you.’

‘Spare Effie?’ said the old man as he shook hands with Mrs. Martyn, ‘oh yes, certainly, I always spare her when she wants to go, poor heart; her life would be a very poor one if it was always spent beside her old father.’

‘Nonsense, dad, that’s only another form of conceit, the conceit that apes humility; you know well enough that I am never so happy as beside you,’ said Effie.

‘I know you’re a dear good child to me, and do your best to make me believe so.’

‘I think it is quite true, Mr. Graham,’ said Mrs. Martyn ; ‘Effie is thoroughly happy at home, but she kindly takes compassion on me, and I console myself by feeling we are such close neighbours, that you could send for her at any moment if you wanted her?’

‘Yes, yes, of course, of course. Have you still shooting friends with you?’

‘Yes, two ; and Mr. Wentworth, my husband’s cousin, came down last evening on some business, but intends leaving to-morrow, I believe. He is suffering very much from a bad finger ; he cut it with his signet ring, and it took to doing badly, as they say, so he is ordered to keep it in a sling. He went with us to church, but

suffered so much the whole time that he is quite knocked up this afternoon. I left him lying down.'

'Poor fellow! Has he advice for it?' asked Mr. Graham. Effie had taken up a sleepy little spaniel that had been dozing on the rug, and was burying her face in its soft curly coat, apparently quite indifferent to the conversation.

'Oh yes, he's been doctored wonderfully, but he really seems quite ill; few things pull you down and make you feel more ill than that kind of suffering; the loss of sleep it occasions is in itself a cause of illness.'

'True, true; cold water, tell him, cold water constantly applied is better than any lotion or any doctor. Make him try it.'

‘He will not be sufficiently long under my care for me to nurse him with any effect, I fear, but I will tell him what you say. I must go home though now, so I shall expect you, Effie, to lunch to-morrow,’ said Mrs. Martyn rising to go, and as she bent over Effie to kiss her, she murmured,

‘Is your question answered?’

‘Yes, thank you so much, I could not think what could be the matter; does he go early to-morrow?’

‘I should think the 10.40 train.’

‘Thank you, dear, good-bye.’

‘Pretty little animal that, madam, is it not?’ asked Mr. Graham, supposing Tiny was being admired, as Effie was holding her in her arms during this whispered conversation.

‘A lovely little creature, but I had always a greater fancy for big dogs. I don’t think I care much about pets.’

‘You have one, I believe, that excels all others.’

‘Baby, you mean. Yes, I could not pet a dog I think now I have her, and I should be so afraid of her getting bitten.’

‘Yes, yes ; that would not do at all. I have not seen her lately ; send her in, will you? Tiny shan’t bite her,’ said the old man, smiling.’

‘I am sure she will not ; I will send her in. She is getting very funny now with a strange Chaldaic or Syriac language, it may be either, but it is certainly one “not understood of the people.” Good-bye.’ And Mrs. Martyn went home, having most

cleverly, without betraying her, answered Effie's question conveyed in her note—

‘Why is his arm in a sling? What is the matter?’

The next morning when, at the usual breakfast hour, all had assembled but Cecil Wentworth, Mantle entered with an apology from him for his non-appearance, but he was too unwell to move, and ‘really, sir,’ he continued, ‘I think Mr. Wentworth is very ill, and it is highly necessary that a medical man should be instantly sent for.’

Martyn went immediately to his room, and ten minutes after a man and horse were making the best of their way to the next town for a medical man.

CHAPTER V.

IT is a cold, bright, fresh autumn day as Mrs. Wentworth, in her comfortable brougham, is driving along the road to Fulham. She has heard from her son of the foolish reports circulated about Nina, and she fancies that Cecil is somewhat unusually interested about the matter. He has never given his opinion of the young lady beyond that one remark in his letter to his mother, when he first made her acquaintance ; but this very fact, and the indignation he expresses about the idle gossip respecting her, makes his mother

wonder if some warmer feeling is not at the bottom of it.

She proposed, therefore, herself going to call on Mrs. Elwyn, so as to make the young lady's acquaintance. Cecil seemed to like the idea, and accordingly, on the very Monday that the doctor was sent to him at Beechdale, his mother was proceeding, all unconscious of his illness, to Fulham.

The Elwyns were at home, and with some astonishment read the card handed them by the servant; but a few seconds placed them perfectly at their ease with their visitor, and when she left them they could talk of nothing but her grace, her kindness, her perfect manners.

'I have heard,' said Nina, 'what Cecil Wentworth said of his mother, and that he

thought no one could compare with her ; I am not surprised, with such a model before him, that he is difficult to please.'

'Yes ; I don't think the Tauntons said too much about her, I own, but Bessie is so enthusiastic that I did not quite believe her,' said Mrs. Elwyn.

'They live next door to her, I think, do they not ?' asked Nina.

'Yes, they do ; they go to all her Wednesdays, which are charming, I believe ; they're over I suppose now.'

'Yes ; last Wednesday was the last, so Marian Ayrton told me, mother,' said Nina after a pause. 'She wanted me so much to go and see her ; may I ? I had a letter yesterday morning, saying she wanted me so particularly to go.'

‘Well, if you wish it Nina my dear, of course you are old enough to judge for yourself; I should say the less you see of that family the better, but go if you like.’

‘I will just go and hear what she has to say then, mother, she seems sad and worried. Listen to me, darling,’ she said, taking her mother’s hand, who had turned away with a grave and saddened expression on her face, ‘I had a dream when I was very young: I thought I could do a great deal, far greater than I or any erring mortal has strength for—that I could save from an evil fate another still weaker than myself. I failed, as I deserved for such presumption; my failure woke me. I shall not dream again. Trust me, dearest mother, I will

not disgrace myself or you, I will never marry anyone whom you will not be glad and proud to welcome as a son. Do you believe me?’

‘I do, my child,’ said Mrs. Elwyn, turning to her and taking both her hands in hers; ‘I believe you as one whose life has been pure, honest, and true as yours deserves to be believed.’

Nina stooped and kissed her mother, and went away to get ready for her drive. She reached after some time the gloomy old house in Russell Square, and found on enquiry that Marian was at home. She was shown into the large drawing-room, with its cold-looking heavy old-fashioned furniture, with the books on the polished mahogany table that were always there,

with no fire in the polished grate—nothing in the room that gave the slightest idea of comfort or elegance.

Nina waited there some time, and at length Marian entered.

‘ Oh, I’m so glad to see you, darling Nina, I’m awfully untidy ; you must excuse that : I’ve been awfully busy all the morning, but I came to you just as I was, for I knew *you* wouldn’t mind coming up in my room, will you, it’s in an awful state of confusion, but there’s a jolly fire there, and it’s so cold here—will you come?’

‘ Oh yes, certainly,’ said Nina; ‘ it is cold to day, it makes one think of winter and winter clothing.’

Nina felt impelled to say that; poor Marian’s dress was an old washed-out

muslin which had done duty all the summer for breakfasts and fetes, Nina thought, as it had once been a very handsome showy pattern, though little trace of it could be seen now; and it did look wretched and dull on this bright, fresh, frosty day:

‘Yes, I do not feel the cold though up in my room; come up and see how warm it is.’ And Marian led the way up the broad staircase to the large room over the drawing-room, which was appropriated to her use. She might well apologise for its confusion!

Sofa, chairs, table, bed, all were covered with some litter, but she tossed the contents of two chairs on to the bed; and putting Nina in one, seated herself in the other, close beside the fire, which certainly

was, as she expressed it, a very 'jolly one.'

'It was very kind of you to come, Nina,' said Marian, 'I do so want to talk to you; I am so awfully wretched about Rob; and Papa keeps on worrying about him so. Don't you think he ought to be told?'

'Certainly he ought,' said Nina.

'Well, that's what I say, but I can't tell him; really I'm afraid.'

'You are the right person, who else is there?'

'I thought perhaps you would, Nina dear; you are so brave and quiet and clever, and know how to say things rightly; I don't one bit—I should make such a muddle.'

'Me tell him! My dear Marian, I never

saw your father but twice in my life; he knows nothing of me, and I, indeed, am the last person now to have anything to do with it.'

'Well, do you think Cecil Wentworth would? He might tell papa all about it from the beginning, and break to him that we don't know where Rob is now. Oh Nina, what that boy has been to me: the hours and hours I have laid crying on that bed about him—you don't know what I've suffered. To see poor Pa in the morning look so eagerly for the letters, and hear him say, "There's sure to be one from Robert *this* morning," I knowing all the time he was in that dirty little hole in Kensington; then how, every morning, he only takes them up and sighs—never says anything, but looks

so white and sad. And I have no one to talk to, no one to advise with me; I have to go out to horrid balls and parties with my heart aching all the time; always with this wretched secret weighing me down. I wrote to Cecil Wentworth the other day and asked him to come here and speak to me, but he has never come or answered me.'

'You wrote to Mr. Wentworth!' said Nina, 'and asked him to come here?'

'Yes, why not? I wanted him; I thought it would be so much better for him to tell papa, and so it would be; why shouldn't I write to him?'

'Well,' said Nina, smiling, 'I think it is not usual for young ladies to write and make appointments with young men.'

'Oh that's all rubbish, Nina; I never

study all that. I wanted him, and I wrote to tell him I did; there's not another man in the world like him I believe. He's more sense in his little finger than others have in their whole body, and I'd rather be advised by him than anyone in the world. The fact is, darling, I don't mind telling you, because you are almost my sister, you know, I'm awfully in love with him and I'll marry him or no one.'

'Oh Marian,' said Nina, with a pained expression in her gentle face, 'pray do not say so.'

'Why not; what's the harm; isn't he worthy to be loved?'

'I dare say he is, I know nothing of him; but it seems so dreadful to say that—to acknowledge it to anyone, even if you feel

it, unless it was mutual; you know what I mean.'

'I don't, indeed; I see no earthly reason why I should not say I love him to you. I'm not going to put it in the "Times" newspaper; you are like a relation.'

'Stay, Marian, dear, one moment, let me at once put that idea away. I am never likely to be related to you.'

'What do you mean?' interrupted Marian excitedly. 'You are going to give up poor Robert after all he's suffered for you. You will not be so cruel, so unjust, so'—

'Gently, gently, Marian, hear me and be just. You asked me but this instant why you should not love Cecil Wentworth—was he not worthy of love? Can you say that your brother is? Has he acted in one single

instance since our foolish engagement like a good, true, and honourable man? Has he proved the strength of his love for me by one good or self-denying act? Should I be justified in making all who do love me truly, wretched for his sake?’

‘You engaged yourself to be his wife, you ought to abide by it. If you had given him hope when he was here last you might have saved him from going away as he has from us all. He may be dead, perhaps, and if so his death lies at your door!’ said Marian with a flushed face and angry excited voice.

‘What hope could I give him, Marian? All those who have a right to counsel and advise me told me from the first your brother was unworthy of my love; and

remember, Marian, through your representations as much as anything I foolishly disbelieved *them*, and pitied and believed *him*. Too soon I found how frail was the reed on which I leant—too soon saw all that had been said was only too true; but I bore with him patiently, hoping against hope, that if he loved me as he said he did it would influence him and guide him right at last. In pity I still clung to him; understand, Marian, in pity always more than love; but his reckless perseverance in the wrong way, his want of truth and honour so incessantly evidenced, has made me at last, for my own self-respect and for my dear mother's sake, to whom this has been a great sorrow, at once and for ever renounce all idea of ever being Robert's wife.'

‘Then I call it abominable, shameful,’ said Marian, rising and walking up and down the room, ‘trifling with a poor fellow’s love, deceiving him in such a manner, luring him on only to laugh at him at last;’ rather worse than owning that you feel an honest faithful love for anyone. I should be more ashamed coolly to say I’d given a man up I’d promised to marry than to acknowledge I loved a man who’d never asked me, shocking as you think it.’

‘You are angry, Marian, now; your love for your brother makes you unjust; but by-and-bye you will think differently.’

‘I shan’t, I shan’t; I shall hate you now as much as I ever loved you, and I tell you what, Nina Elwyn, I’ll watch you, and if ever you are going to be married to anyone

else, I'll tell him the whole story of your cruelty and falsity to my poor brother. Trust me, I will; he has had wretchedness enough without you throwing another stone at him; but you shall not marry while he lives if I can help it. I shall stop at nothing, you may depend. I loved you once for Robert's sake, and would have done anything to serve you. I hate you now, and you shall learn to dread a woman's hate; now go, I do not wish to see or look upon your face again.'

Nina had risen when Marian first began her last excited speech, and when she could be heard, said very gently, as though the wild vindictive tenour of her words had not reached her—

'Good-bye, Marian, if I can ever serve

you or yours I shall be truly glad to do so. I wish I could have done as you wanted me to-day.'

'Oh, I dare say. Go, I say. No, I will not shake hands with you, never, never again. Go away. Would to heaven neither I nor my poor brother had ever seen your sickly white face; take it away out of my sight.' And dashing away Nina's proffered hand, she flung herself into a chair and burst into a flood of passionate tears.

Nina stood for an instant irresolute; there was something so piteous in the passion of the poor desolate girl, in this life-long love for the worthless brother in whose defence she was thus excited, that it seemed hard to leave her thus; but ere Nina could utter the words of compassion and sympathy

which rose to her lips, Marian sprang again from her chair, and said in a still louder voice—

‘Go! I command you, and take these words with you to haunt you—you shall never be the wife of living man.’

Nina made no answer; the words she had been about to say died on her lips, and she only walked quietly from the room, and down the wide staircase of the dark, dreary-looking house, glad enough to find herself in her own snug little carriage, driving quickly to her own home.

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN Mrs. Wentworth reached home after her visit to the Elwyns, she went at once to Cecil's room, to see if his fire was lighted and all comfortable for his return. Whilst she was thus occupied there the servant entered with a letter.

‘What is it, Danby?’

‘A telegram, madam, one shilling and sixpence to pay, and will you be so good as to sign it—it is a quarter to four.’

‘Yes ; but wait a moment, let me see what it is.’ Her face changed a little as she read it, but she only quietly said,

‘Mr. Wentworth does not return to-night, he is not very well,’ and she signed the paper, looking at her watch to be sure of the time, and when the man had left the room she sat down in Cecil’s easy chair, and read the telegram over again.

‘C. Wentworth to Mrs. Wentworth. Not well enough to return. Will write by post.’

‘What can be the matter?’ she thought, ‘is it his finger, or has he had some accident? shall I go to him?’ Ah! that was what she would have liked to do, but she knew how he would dislike an unnecessary fuss made; that if it was only a temporary inconvenience which a night’s rest might set right, he would be so vexed to have her coming there, putting his friends, per-

haps, to trouble; and so, with her quiet self-command, she bore the anxiety she could not help feeling, and passed a sleepless night, picturing her idolised son ill and suffering, and then trying to put aside her fears by remembering how seldom we imagine things exactly as they are; how the dread picture painted by our imagination is so unlike its reality; and how often when we have had no fears, no dreads, there has been a shadow hanging over us, a burden coming for us to bear, which, had we seen and known, we should have cried with bitter tears to have been spared.

She reasoned thus with herself during those waking hours in that long, dreary night. 'How silly!' some may say. What was there to make her anxious in those few

words—‘Not well enough to come back?’ He might have had a headache, or a cold, and being very comfortable with his friends, liked better to stay there. What could there be to cause the slightest disquiet? Easy to argue—to say so when it concerns some one in whose life their’s is not bound up; and happy; perhaps, those who have no one to care for in such measure that every change of countenance is seen, every grief and vexation felt as if it were their own, any brief separation counted as an age, each return watched and waited for with an agony of expectation, the footstep known above all others, the voice, with its every modulation making music in the heart which has learnt to vibrate at its gentlest sound. Happy, perhaps, those who know this not—

as happy as one would be who had never seen the summer flowers, or heard sweet music, or the song of birds, or anything which makes the earth less earthy, and makes us dream of heaven.

But of this happier state, if it be so, Mrs. Wentworth knew nothing. In her husband's grave lay buried the first love of her heart, but from its ashes had sprung the love of her boy : pain to him was pain to her, and she would have borne any sorrow or suffering to spare him. To those who love like her, her night of distress can well be imagined.

With the morning's post came a letter, but not from him, though it came from Beechdale. She eagerly tore it open, and read as follows :—

‘DEAR MRS. WENTWORTH,

‘Your son has a slight attack of fever, brought on, our doctor says, by the extreme pain of his finger, which is not doing well. He is adopting some fresh treatment, and he trusts he will be soon all right again.

‘I hope, dear Mrs. Wentworth, if you feel the slightest uneasiness about your son, that you will come here at once. We shall be most happy to see you. There is a room at your disposal whenever you like to come; but the doctor assures me there is not the slightest cause for anxiety, and that a day or two’s care will soon set Mr. Wentworth to rights. I only suggest your coming for your own satisfaction, and trust you will not hesitate if you would be more happy beside him. Yours, very sincerely,

‘E. MARTYN.’

To this was attached a small postscript, in very illegible writing—‘I think you will be happier if you come, mother darling; but I have the kindest attention.’

She did not take long to decide; a small valise was packed, and Mrs. Wentworth was rapidly proceeding to Beechdale. She was shown on her arrival into the drawing-room, and eagerly advancing to a lady seated at work on a sofa, but who rose on her entrance, said—

‘Dear Mrs. Martyn, thank you so much for letting me come. How is my boy?’

The lady answered, smiling as she spoke, ‘I am not Mrs. Martyn, but she will be here directly; will you be seated? Mr. Wentworth is slightly better to-day.’

‘I beg your pardon, I am not personally

acquainted with Mrs. Martyn, although Mr. Martyn is my nephew. I am sorry to make her first acquaintance under such circumstances. Does my son expect me, do you think?’

‘I really don’t know, I am only a neighbour, and have come in to see if I could make myself useful to Mrs. Martyn—here she is.’ And Mrs. Martyn entering, held out both her hands, with a cordial welcome, to Cecil’s mother.

‘Going on quite nicely, Mrs. Wentworth, I assure you,’ she said, ‘you will find him on a sofa in his room, looking very interesting.’

‘Poor boy, what has been the matter? Fever?’

‘Yes, a feverish attack, brought on by

the extreme pain of the finger, we suppose, though our doctor thinks there is scarcely enough mischief in that to cause such disturbance, but that over-fatigue or anxiety must have helped to bring it on.'

'He has been very busy lately, I know; I tell him he works too hard. May I go to him—does he expect me?'

'Yes; I think he believes you will come, but I will have him told you are here first; it would not be so well to walk into his room unprepared, his head has ached so much, it might cause a return, anything sudden. Tell Mantle, dear Effie, to go to Mr. Wentworth, and say his mother is here, will you, please?'

'What a beautiful girl,' said Mrs. Wentworth as Effie left the room, 'so singular-looking and yet so lovely.'

‘She is very lovely, is she not? but a strange girl; she will dress her hair in that style because it is like no one else. She is a dear, good, affectionate thing, though, with all her funny little ways. I don’t know what I should do without her; she was so useful to me yesterday.’

‘Ah! I have not yet apologised, Mrs. Martyn, for the trouble my son has caused you, which has, I fear, been great,’ said Mrs. Wentworth.

‘Not at all, do not name it; Mr. Wentworth is a great favourite with us all, and we have been pleased to be of use.’

‘Mr. Wentworth is ready to see Mrs. Wentworth,’ said Mantle, in his slow and measured accents, having quietly entered and cautiously closed the door behind him before speaking.

‘Let me be pioneer, then,’ said Mrs. Martyn, and Mrs. Wentworth followed her to a charming room, filled with every comfort and luxury, where on a sofa lay her idolised boy. Mrs. Martyn only showed her in, and left them alone.

‘My mother!’ he exclaimed, rising partially on his couch, and, taking his mother’s hands between his, he drew her gently to him, and kissed her long and tenderly.

‘Are you glad to see me?’ she asked.

‘Glad! are we glad to see the sun shine?’ he answered.

‘Silly boy, to pay your old mother such compliments; they are only fit for the lady of your heart.’

‘Exactly; and so I pay them to you.’

She only kissed him again in answer, then said—

‘But tell me now of yourself ; what has been wrong ?

‘I hardly know, I have felt ill and in wretched pain with my silly finger, and moreover my head has ached so.’

‘That was from the fever, I dare say, dear boy. Well, I am come to nurse you now, and take you home quite well.’

‘I trust so. It fidgets me, lying here, I have so much to do ; but I have only been on this sofa an hour, and feel quite willing to go back to bed. I should make a good hand of travelling to London, and going to work there.’

‘Oh, yes ! do not think of that ; your work is to get well, that is what is appointed you now,’ said Mrs. Wentworth : ‘think of nothing else ; the more you worry

about what you ought to do and cannot, the longer you will be unable to do it.'

'Take off all these wraps, dear,' he said, 'put them down here anywhere; don't go away, it's so nice to see you.'

'You baby! I'm not going away;' and she rose and laid aside her things, and took her station by his side, and with her hand in his he fell asleep, nor woke when some time after the door gently opened, and Effie entered with two cups of tea.

'I would not let Mrs. Martyn come,' she whispered, 'she has been running about all day; you will come down to dine, will you not? it is dressing-time, but the gong is not sounded now, because of Mr. Wentworth.'

'Thank you, my dear,' was Mrs. Wentworth's whispered reply; 'if he is no

worse when he wakes, I will join you at dinner.'

He was not worse, but refreshed by his sleep, and Mrs. Wentworth went down to dinner; and Effie, whom Mrs. Martyn induced to stay, sang, and thus finished the conquest she had made of the new comer.

Cecil was pronounced the next morning better, but the doctor considered it safer and wiser that he should remain until the end of the week quietly at Beechdale; so, by dint of his mother's and Martyn's persuasions, he was induced to consent.

'I tell you what, old fellow,' Martyn said, 'if you'll stay, I'll ask your favourite Farrant to come over and see you to-morrow; we can give him a bed then, and we shall be a jolly party. I want to see that fellow awfully.'

So Farrant was duly invited, and, to Cecil's surprise, he came.

He hated strangers, and sleeping out of his own house, but he loved Cecil Wentworth with that strong love which sometimes exists between men who have been schoolfellows; and when he heard he was lying ill within reach, he threw aside all his prejudices and peculiarities, and drove off to him at once; and though his greeting was only, 'Well, child, what's all this nonsense about?' still Cecil knew that it was the strongest attachment to and interest for him that had brought him from his home.

He was able now to come down in the evening on to the drawing-room sofa, and, as Martyn predicted, they were a very

merry party. On the evening of the last day of the Wentworths' stay Mrs. Martyn invited Effie again to dinner, and Cecil voted himself quite well enough to join the party at table.

When the ladies left the dinner room Farrant's first speech was, 'That's what I call a pretty girl. She's worth forty of the county belle, Amabel de Vere.'

'Why Farrant, I heard you rave of her,' said Cecil.

'So I did, that is to say, child, if raving means saying she was the best-looking woman of my acquaintance, and had a foot worth a glass case; but I hadn't seen Miss Graham then, and I pronounce her the best-looking woman I ever saw alive.'

'Well, come, I can't go so far as that,

Farrant,' said Martyn; 'Effie's a pretty little thing, but there is no intelligence, no cleverness in her face. I'd sooner have a plain woman who had more expression. You might as well look at a doll.'

'I don't agree with you; women don't want to be clever, only beautiful. A woman should be a household ornament, something to gaze at which is perpetually pleasing one's eyesight.'

'How about when she grows old, then?' said Cecil, smiling.

'What do you mean?'

'Why, if you had married a beautiful wife for an ornament, when she grew old and faded what would you do with her?'

'She would still be beautiful if you had chosen rightly; real beauty never goes quite away.'

‘You think, then,’ answered Cecil, ‘that the loveliness of youth would leave its traces there, as the setting sun leaves golden tints upon the landscape, or the soft moon turns it all to silver. As a poet sweetly sings:—

“Still as dear to the sight

Is the landscape we love in its pale moonlight.”

The radiance and brilliancy of youth may be gone, but the beauty which was once there remains still, though shadowed and softened by age.’

‘Exactly, child; you speak like a printed book, with the wisdom of a Solon and the eloquence of a Demosthenes.’

‘Yes, Wentworth has got quite poetical since his illness, has he not? I tell you what, Farrant, between you and me, I think his illness was not altogether occa-

sioned by the finger; that there is a slight disease of the heart as well.'

'Nonsense, Martyn, I can assure you.'

But Martyn interrupted him with a loud laugh as he declared he was blushing like a girl, and that it was an evident 'case,' until Wentworth, jumping up, said he would go to the ladies to be defended from such an unjustifiable attack. And so he did, though Martyn holloaed out after him that he was only proving his words by seeking the ladies. A man in love always liked to be with those who reminded him of his divinity.

When Cecil entered the drawing room he found his mother turning over the leaves of Effie's music. She had asked her to sing, and drawing her chair beside her she was listening with the greatest interest and

enjoyment; and Effie, inspired by the pleasure she felt she was giving to one who was so excellent a judge, sang her best. Cecil stood still until the song ended, and then, advancing to the piano, he said,

‘Thank you, Miss Graham, you sang that to perfection.’

The beaming gleam of joy that danced in her eyes, which she raised to him only for a moment and dropped as suddenly, might have told him a tale. He asked her to sing again, and yet again, turning over her music himself now, uttering thanks and admiration after every song; till Mrs. Martyn rose and declared Effie would be tired, and should sing no more, and as she did so whispered to Cecil—

‘Are you converted to my opinion at last?’

‘Miss Graham’s singing has, somehow,

acquired the only thing it wanted,' he answered, ' heartfelt expression.'

When he went up to bed, somewhat tired, earlier than the rest, his mother went in to him, and, as she kissed and wished him good night, she said—

' Ah, Cecil! what a sweet daughter you might bring me.'

' Hush! mother.'

CHAPTER VII.

THE Wentworths and the shooting friends were gone, and Beechdale was restored to its accustomed tranquillity. Christmas was drawing on, the Elwyns were to spend it with the Martyns, but there would be no other company.

About three weeks before Christmas, Mr. Martyn came in from a ride, and coming up to his wife's sitting-room, a pleasant, snug little place opening into her bed-room, where she spent most of her time until dinner, said—

‘ Oh, my dear ! I’ve been to see Rita, and the child looks so awfully ill, that I really think we must have her home at once.’

‘ What ! before the holydays, George ?’

‘ Yes, why not ? they break up on the 18th. I do not see very much difference.’

‘ Then, I think that is the more reason for her not coming before ; she has waited so long she may as well finish it out.’

‘ Every day is an age to her, she is miserable, and I cannot, and what is more, I will not bear it, Emily. She looked up at me with eyes that seemed to recall the dead, and ask me to be merciful and kind to her child. She shall come home, and stay home.’

‘ Thank you, George, I am touched by your consideration for *me*, and your allusion to the *past* makes your conduct appear in a still better light.’

‘Nonsense and stuff, Emily; don’t get on stilts about nothing. I have a duty to perform to that child as much as to you. She shall not annoy you—I will make that my care—but she shall not stay at a school where she is ill-fed and wretched in every way, but come to her proper refuge—her father’s home.’

‘Then I will thank you to provide some one to look after her; my nurse is afraid of her, and so is Miss Temple; and I did not tell you, but you force it from me now, that Stedman believes the child’s enemy, of whom the old woman spoke, is no other than Rita.’

‘What utter folly! How can you listen to such trash, when you know yourself that Rita worships the baby?’

‘Ah! she says so, but that may be art;

she is very clever—cleverer than you think.'

'Ah! well, I am inclined to risk it; if the baby comes to any harm, it will not be through Rita. I shall write to-night to Miss Crose, and say she is to return on Monday.'

'Then you will be pleased to see that there is a proper person here to take charge of her.'

'I will endeavour to find some one; but you see, my dear Emily,' said Martyn, trying to soothe her as the difficulty presented itself, 'I have not much time: I'll advertise in the "Westbury Gazette" for a person, and in the meanwhile'—

'Yes; in the meanwhile, what is to be done? Stedman won't have her in the nursery.'

‘Stedman won’t have her! then I can only say that Stedman may walk out of the front door as soon as she likes. Am I to pay servants to pick and choose what employment they will? I hired her as nurse; and nurse to the two children she shall be, or go.’

- ‘Don’t get excited, George, pray. When I say Stedman won’t have her, of course I mean she will object to it so much as to give warning rather than have the child again in the nursery; and as she is an excellent manager of the baby, it is a most aggravating thing; and I think, if you are bent on having Rita home, your wisest course would be first to secure a proper person to have the care of her,—a young lady who would not object to dress her and

attend to her wardrobe, and teach her ; see to her altogether, in short.'

' A person exactly to suit and manage such a child as Rita would be very difficult to get, and might take a considerable time; I could not leave her where I know she is so wretched for so long a period, so do, my dear Emily, endeavour to content yourself with my arrangements. I will write to Mrs. Wentworth, and ask her if she can recommend a fitting person; she talked to me a great deal about Rita, and she will know just what I want. I really will try to prevent the child worrying you, Emmy dear,' he continued, as Mrs. Martyn made no reply, only sat gazing into the fire, the light of which glistened on the large tears trembling on her eyelids. He stooped

down to kiss her, but she pushed him away, and rising from her seat, said—

‘That child has always stood between me and happiness, and a presentiment of evil to me through her has always pursued me; but when entreaties fail I have only to obey, I know, it is a wife’s pleasant alternative.’

And thus saying, giving her husband no time to reply, she left the room.

Martyn hated a scene, hated an argument, hated everything which gave him trouble, in short, and avoided it if possible. It was this disposition which had made him ignore Rita’s position at home, and the hope of peace had induced him to send her to school; but her wan face, when he saw her, her touching appeal to come home to

baby, was irresistible; and, contenting himself with the belief that Emily would not mind if he got a governess for the child, he promised her she should come home. It was, therefore, doubly annoying to him to find this opposition from his wife, and he was puzzled to know how to act. He found himself placed in a difficult and troublesome position, and could only endeavour to extricate himself by appealing to Mrs. Wentworth to send some one to him at once to take charge of Rita. This he accordingly did, and by return of post he received a very kind answer from Mrs. Wentworth, saying she thought she could find just the person to suit, and would see her at once, and let Mr. Martyn know in the course of a few days. She said Cecil's finger was

quite well, but he did not seem quite himself yet. She had made Miss Elwyn's acquaintance, she went on to say, and thought her a most charming, intelligent girl, 'quite a treat to talk to in these days, when every girl you meet seems to think you are talking Greek if you allude to anything beyond the frivolities they now live amongst, and which seem to be their only enjoyment. I could cordially answer "yes" to the question put to me by a very clever and amusing man the other day, "Are you not tired of fun, Mrs. Wentworth?" I think incessant joking is very wearisome, although I can enjoy a good laugh at a good thing with anyone. I have a warm feeling for sense and sentiment; but you will think I have none of the first and too much of the second, if I

prose on any more; so, with every good wish for the merry season to you and yours, believe me, yours, &c.'

Martyn carried this letter in triumph to his wife, but she only said, 'Mrs. Wentworth will do her best, I daresay, but the young person is not here, and to-day is Saturday. Stedman's temper is delightful, with the prospect of having charge of Rita again.'

'I cannot help it, Emily, she must get pleased again. Poor little Rita is so becalmed by her school discipline, you may depend on it she won't be much trouble at first.'

'We shall see. I only know I dread Monday, with a strange and unaccountable dread that I can't overcome.'

'Then, my dear Emily, I must say I

think you are 'weak to childishness, and I can only wish you—wiser.' And with a forced laugh, he went out of the room, and she heard him whistling the *Dónna Móbile* as he ran downstairs.

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. MARTYN had spoken truly when he said how wan and ill poor little Rita looked. The want of sufficient food, and of the pure air, exercise, and liberty to which she had been all her life accustomed, had had its effects on the poor child, and she was indeed subdued.

Her life at home had been solitary, it is true, but it was free. In the lovely woods, in the green meadows, with birds and insects and her little dog for company, Rita had passed, though an unchildlike life,

perhaps, a quiet, poetical one, suited to her pure breeding and gentle nurture. Though in hedges and brambles she tore her clothes and made her rough hair still rougher, there was a smell of fresh air about them. The dirt she gathered on her clothes and hands was wholesome dirt, and the large bath into which she sprang and dabbled every morning, and the thorough soaping and scrubbing at night administered by Gibson, prevented the scrambling for birds' eggs, the gardening, or the making of mud pies, from injuring the child's health. The meals, well cooked and good in quality, always satisfied her appetite; but if by chance they failed in doing so, she could always ask and have what she needed. A tumbler of fresh milk and a biscuit in the

morning, if she was awake earlier than usual ; the same at night, if she was up later.

How different her life at school ! In the little, hard, cold bed, with its scant covering, she was awake by five in the morning, and she must lie there till the bell at half-past six summoned them to rise. She must work at her lessons in the cold, cheerless schoolroom until eight o'clock without food, and then have a breakfast of milk-and-water and bread-and-butter. There was plenty of bread-and-butter, plenty of milk-and-water, and they were allowed, nay encouraged, to eat as much as they could ; and some hardier, stronger children, more roughly nurtured, ate a hearty meal, but Rita could not.

Sick at heart, cold, and sad, it needed tempting food indeed to induce her to eat. Then, the long, straight, dull, uninteresting walk, which in the winter followed breakfast—lessons again, and the dinner, consisting of large joints of meat and solid puddings, which she was equally unable to eat, and the tea being a repetition of the breakfast, affording no greater temptation to her. The same frock worn all day, in a close room with thirty other girls, always seemed to her dirty and uncomfortable. The comfortless pretence for a wash at night, when a very sleepy servant just wiped over her face and hands, after which, chilly and wretched, she crept into her little hard bed—all, in its great contrast with home, told daily and hourly on the

sensitive child, added to a pining wish to see the one thing on which her passionate nature had centered itself, her little baby sister. Truly she did look with pleading eyes in her father's face, and pray to be brought home, and on his promise that she should return on the Monday and never go back to school again, she forgave him all his neglect, and counted the moments as though her life hung on each till that day should come.

‘So you’re going to leave, little one?’ said Miss Jackson, on the Saturday previous to that happy Monday to which poor Rita looked so anxiously.

‘Yes, I am going home for good on Monday.’

‘Ain’t you sorry to leave this delightful abode of peace and plenty, my child?’

‘Sorry!’ echoed Rita, contemptuously.

‘Yes, sorry, little girl; if you live to grow up, you will look back on these school days, and wish you were here, a little school child again.’

‘No, never!’ said Rita, emphatically.

‘Well, I tell you what, girls; it’s a half-holiday, and poor little Turnip’s last, here’ (Miss Jackson had given her this *soubriquet* from her white face); ‘let us go and buy up old Mother Red Cap’s basket and have a feast, a farewell feast.’

‘Hear, hear!’ said a chorus of voices.

‘I have no doubt she is at the gate by this time; let us go and buy, and if the Birds interfere, why, fill their beaks with gingerbreads.’

This joke of course elicited a great laugh and the girls flocked out into the play-

ground to look for Mother Red Cap, who was generally to be found at the gate immediately after dinner.

True to her post, there was the old woman, and her basket was soon emptied. Rita was not allowed to spend her money. Miss Jackson would not hear of it; the treat was to be given by the school. 'And I tell you what, old woman,' said Miss Jackson, 'we must have something to drink with all this stuff, so just go and get us some ginger wine; six bottles. I'll stand treat for that; make haste.'

'Oh dear, I'm afraid that won't do, my dear young lady; how ever shall I manage it?' said the old woman.

'Stick them in your basket, and say you've come back to be paid; that Miss Jackson owes you for a quire of writing

paper, if anybody questions you. I'll be on the look-out ; make haste.'

It was too cold for the girls to care to stay in the playground, and so, each carrying some of the spoils of Mother Red Cap's basket, they returned to the schoolroom, with the exception of Miss Jackson, who had volunteered to wait for the wine.

'Shall I wait, too ?' asked Rita, coming back. 'I want to speak to the woman, and you can't carry it all.'

'Well, yes, you may, child, if you will. Go and put your waterproof cloak on, you can put the bottles underneath it, and it will keep you warm ; and then we will pace up and down as though we were taking a constitutional.'

This they accordingly did, Miss Crose

taking a peep at them once, and thinking how wise it was of Miss Jackson to exercise that poor little white-faced girl.

Mother Red Cap soon returned, and the two girls deposited the wine carefully under their cloaks, Miss Jackson moving away during Rita's whispered conversation with the old woman. When she was gone and they were moving towards the house, Miss Jackson said—

‘I don't want to ask anything you don't like to tell, or pry into your secrets, little one, but that old “party” is not a person to trust as a friend, I can assure you; be careful.’

Rita's pale face flushed as she answered,

‘No, I only wanted to know something.’

‘All right, only I warn you as a friend; come along, let's go and feast.’

They went at once to the schoolroom, where they found the girls all eagerly awaiting them. Rita and Miss Jackson deposited their load, and the latter, drawing a form before the door, desired six of the biggest girls to seat themselves thereon to form a barricade, and forthwith they commenced eagerly to eat and drink, and enjoy, with a relish no other food could have given them, this surreptitious repast, which, by good luck, they managed to complete without interruption; and poor little Rita slept that night with a deep joy in her heart, as she remembered but once more she should sleep in the little hard bed, but once more go cold and hungry to rest, but once more wake to the cold, dreary, monotonous school life she so hated.

Stedman was certainly, as Mrs. Martyn had ironically observed, in a delightful temper at the idea of poor little Rita's return home, and not over consoled by the assurance that she would not have the charge of her. Rita would, of course, she argued, be constantly in the nursery, and how was she to keep her out, she pretending such love to the baby! and she had her own opinions about her love for it, and she only knew it would end in her leaving if it was to go on. This was all confided to Maria as they sat together on the Saturday evening over their supper.

'I think Miss Rita is fond on it, though, right down; Gibson could always keep her good by promising her a nurse of baby.'

‘ Ah! it’s all very well, but I could tell you a tale,’ answered Stedman, ‘ that would make your hair stand on end—and the child was no older than that little fury Rita.’

‘ Oh lor, do tell us; I like them sort of stories,’ said Maria, helping herself to another slice of bread and cheese, to employ herself whilst she listened.

‘ I don’t think there is time now,’ answered Stedman, ‘ the bell will ring in a minute.’

‘ Oh yes, there is, do begin,’ she said, drawing her chair closer to Stedman.

‘ Well, it was when I first went out to service; I was quite a little girl at the time, and mother sent me to a place not far off, so that she could come and look

after me, or I could come home if I liked, and glad enough I was as it turned out. Hark! is that baby?’

‘No, no; go on,’ said Maria.

‘Well, there was two children where I first went, and the mother was a poor sickly thing, doing little but lie about on the sofa and give everyone plenty to do, till at length, to our great comfort, she died,—at least, we thought it would be to our comfort; but, spoilt and tiresome as the children had been before, they were soon worse than ever, for master gave them their way in everything, and there was soon no bearing the house. The oldest girl was a little—there, I don’t know what to call her, but she seemed to have the most evil looks and words and ways that you could imagine a

child to have. She hated me as much as I did her; we used to have fearful shindies, and she'd bite and kick me shamefully. I was continually making up my mind to go, but somehow I stayed on and on, and at the end of the year master married again, and then I left, for I thought I should not like a mistress there, where we'd all got to do pretty much as we liked; but before I could get another place they sent and begged me to come back, for they could get no servant to stay. I went, and wasn't I sorry! The moment I got inside the door I felt as if I should drop, there was a feeling of horror came over me; the house looked so dreary and lonesome, it stood away from the high road, down a lane; it had been an old

farm-house—some said as long back as the days of Queen Bess—and the woodwork about it, and the great oak beams in the kitchen were black with age. The cook, when I came in, was sitting by the fire, which was nearly out, and she said—

‘Ah, poor girl! I am sorry to see a young creature like you come to such a place as this—there’s some horrid deed will be done here before long.’

‘Oh la, what’s that?’ screamed Maria, who, with mouth open and eyes fixed on Stedman, had been listening to the tale; ‘it’s you, Lucy, how you did startle me.’

‘Don’t, Maria, be such an idiot. I declare I won’t go on telling you,’ said Stedman angrily.

‘What is it?’ asked the servant whose quiet entrance had so alarmed Maria.

‘Oh! I’m only telling this stupid girl about a place where I lived once.’

‘Yes, Lucy, when a ’orrid deed’s just agoing to be done, oh! I feel all over creepy like.’

‘I shall go, then. I hates tales like that just as one’s going to bed,’ said Lucy, ‘it makes a “bogy” of the gown hanging up behind the door. I only came to say mistress has sent word she sha’n’t ring for us to-night, it’s so late: good night.’

‘Good night; la! I am glad,’ said Maria. ‘I should have been afraid to go down them back stairs, but go on, do, there’s lots of time now.’

‘Well,’ continued Stedman, ‘the time went on, and things seemed much as common, and at last missis had a little

baby, and then it was decided Miss Charlotte—'

'That's the little wixen.'

'Vixen,' corrected Stedman, 'yes ; well, it was decided Miss Charlotte should go to school. Shall I ever forget her the day she was told she was to go ? She threw the things all over the room, she stamped, she screamed, and then she said, oh, with such vengeance ! " It's that beastly little baby's fault ; I wish it was dead." *It was dead that day week.*'

'Lor,' exclaimed Maria, 'how hawful ! did she kill it ?'

'I don't know,' said Stedman mysteriously, 'it is not for me to say anything ; it was supposed she had a fit. Babies does, very often.'

'Well, I never, and didn't nobody suspect the wixen, *vixen*?' asked Maria.

‘I don’t know,’ again said Stedman, ‘she went away to school, and I left, for the place was so miserable; we used to hear such strange noises, and one night, when I was sitting by the kitchen fire, I heard that poor baby cry as distinct as possible—so I said, “No more of this, I go to-morrow; I would rather forfeit my wages for a twelve-month than stay in this house,” I said. So I came away, and I only hope I may never live in a house where such things happen again, I’ve never rightly felt myself since. Hark! there’s baby crying, bless her; it’s wonderful how fond I’ve got of that dear child since I’ve been here. Good night, Maria, one more peaceful evening before that horrid Rita comes home.’

CHAPTER IX.

It was a fine bright, frosty morning, the happy Monday that Rita was to return home. Mr. Martyn had added to the joy of her return by the promise to fetch her in his dog-cart. She was ready long before the time, and seated in the dreary schoolroom, looking pityingly at the girls as, one by one, they came to take their leave of her, panting to hear the words addressed to her, 'You're fetched, Miss Martyn.'

At length they came, and she rose and walked up to where Miss Crose sat, to wish her good-bye.

‘ Good-bye, my dear,’ said the governess, in her stern hard voice, ‘ I am sorry you have not been wise enough to make yourself happy here; you might have become an intelligent, useful member of society, now I do not know I am sure what will become of you; good-bye, compliments to your papa and mamma,’ and touching with her cold lips the child’s forehead, she told the servant to see Miss Martyn had all her things, and so dismissed her. In the hall she met Miss Jackson.

‘ So you are off, are you, little one ? ’ she said, ‘ good-bye, God bless you ! be a good girl, you’re best at home, that is the place for such as you. I do not suppose we shall ever meet again on earth, but I shall often see your big eyes in my dreams—and pray God I may see them in heaven.’ Stoop-

ing her tall graceful figure to a level with the child, she kissed her long and tenderly; and then saying, in her old light way, 'good-bye, Turnip,' she hurried into the schoolroom. Rita followed the maid with her out to the door, where her eyes lightened with pleasure to see her father and dear beautiful Brown Bess waiting for her. Mr. Martyn sprang out and lifted her into the dog-cart, wrapping her up in the warm fur rug, and jumping up beside her, they were soon spinning along the hard frosty ground, Rita never in her little life having felt so happy before.

'And baby, papa,' at length she asked, 'is baby quite well?'

'Yes, dear, quite well, I think. Now I hope, dear,' he began rather nervously,

‘that you mean to be a good little girl, and mind everything that Stedman and your mother say to you.’

‘Everything mamma says to me—yes, papa, I will try.’

‘Ah! yes, poor child, I forgot; “mamma,” yes; well now, do pray try to be obedient, and—and quiet, and keep yourself clean, and not tear your clothes, and put your things away tidily, and—and all that kind of thing.’ It was his first attempt at a paternal lecture, and he was glad it was over, and he had done his duty, and they were both silent for a time, excepting his occasional addresses to his horse. ‘Steady, Bess;’ ‘what a brute you are to pull;’ ‘woa mare, woa; walk, I say.’

And then Rita said, ‘I am sure I shall

never be quite good with Stedman, papa; she is cruel to baby, she shakes her, indeed she does, when she cries, and it makes me feel so wicked.'

'Oh! but you must not mind that, she does not hurt her, that's to make her good.'

'But she does hurt her, papa, her dear little arms are all bruised when she takes hold of her so roughly.'

'Oh! well you must talk to mamma about that, for I don't understand such things—halloa! do you know that pleasant-looking old lady, that she's nodding and making such signs to you?'

'She sells sweeties and things at the school, papa,' said Rita, and the colour mounted to her face as she caught sight of Mother Red Cap.

‘Well,’ said her father, laughing, ‘I don’t wonder at your blushing. Your acquaintance is not one to be proud of. Well, here we are at home,’ he said, as they drove in sight of the lodge gates, ‘and Ponto has spied us. See how he is running to meet us.’

‘Dear, dear doggie! Oh! how nice and lovely home looks. I will try, indeed, to be good, papa.’

‘That’s a brave little woman, and I am going to get a nice clever, kind lady to come and teach you, and you must learn away as fast as possible, so that papa may be proud of his little girl.’

‘I will try.’

‘That’s right. Now then, steady. Let Mantle lift you out. There’s some traps

of the little girl's, Mantle, behind. 'Come along, Rita. I wonder where mamma is.'

'Mrs. Martyn is h'in the drawing-room, sir,' said the man, depositing with great care Rita's small bag on the hall table; 'Mrs. Martyn has been there h'awaiting Miss Rita's h'arrival some time.'

Rita entered the room, and with a cry of joy sprang to the baby seated on the rug.

Mrs. Martyn let her kiss the child, and then said,

'Well, Rita, now you will say how d'ye do to *me*, perhaps.'

'I beg your pardon, mamma; I was so glad to see baby.'

Mrs. Martyn muttered some reply which

Rita did not catch, and then said, with something more of kindness in her tone,

‘ You certainly do not look as if school-life had suited you, you little white-faced child. Go and take your things off, and then come and see if you can make a good dinner. I will ring and order it up directly. And, Rita, mind, be civil, I beg, to Stedman.’

The child, who had made up her mind to try and do her best in gratitude to her father for bringing her home, felt a gleam of her old temper rising at this, as she thought, unnecessary reminder, and did not, therefore, enter the nursery as amiably as she would have done. It was a great effort to hold out her hand and say, ‘ Good morning, Stedman.’

‘Good morning, Miss Rita. I hope your ma’ has told you about the new arrangement. You’re to keep your own room and not come in the nursery. The small room by the hall door is to be your play-room, and, when the governess is here, your study, and you are not to be here at all.’

‘Not come in the nursery—not come and play with baby even?’ said Rita, with a startled, pained look in her large eyes.

‘No, not at all—your mamma does not wish it.’

‘Oh, very well,’ said Rita, and she moved away into her own little bedroom, the joy of her coming home thus cruelly damped, unable to utter another word of either complaint or remonstrance.

How many a time, in her wretched little

bed at school, had she lulled herself to sleep with thoughts of 'baby,' recalled the feeling of the tiny fingers in her hair, heard again the pretty baby laughter at the game of 'Bo peep,' and found her pillow, in the morning, often wet with tears shed at some sad dream of harm to baby; how had she counted the minutes to the time when again she should hold, in her warm embrace, this darling little sister, imagined the joy of guiding the tottering unsteady steps, and hearing the first words of baby language, her own name perhaps lisped first. And now to know that, in the same house, she and baby were to be comparatively strangers, those happy hours in the nursery were over for ever. 'Oh! what shall I do?'

was the bitter cry, so often uttered from the depths of weary hearts weighed down with hopeless sorrow. To some whose path in life is bright and cheerful, and who are surrounded with love and happiness, and to others grown old in sorrow and worn with care, this grief of Rita's may seem slight and even absurd ; but in her dull joyless life the baby had shone as a star in a dark night, and she felt, now to have this one only joy taken from her was more than she could bear ; but she had promised her father she would try to be good, and so, with a great effort, mastering her sorrow and her anger, she went down quietly to her dinner.

CHAPTER X.

NINA ELWYN was sitting working busily in their pretty morning-room, looking over the garden, singing, as she worked, one of the sad, sweet little ballads she loved so much, when the maid announced—

‘Mrs. Wentworth.’

‘I must apologise, dear Miss Elwyn, for so early a visit,’ she said, ‘but I wanted to catch you at home, for mine is not a mere visit of ceremony.’

‘There is no need for apology, Mrs. Wentworth,’ answered Nina, ‘on *your* part;

I have to ask you to pardon being shown in here; the maid has orders to do so with all callers before lunch.'

'I am sure any apology on that score is unnecessary; it is a privilege to be admitted into such cosy quarters in such weather; it is a very sharp morning, and it required some courage to leave one's fireside, but I wanted so much to talk to you about poor Miss Ayrton. You know her very well, do you not?'

'Not very intimately,' said Nina, vexed with herself that she could not help the colour mounting to her face.

'Oh! I fancied from what she said you were quite old friends, and could, by your knowledge of her, assist me in my wish to serve her,' said Mrs. Wentworth.

‘I should be very glad to do anything I could for Marian Ayrton,’ answered Nina, ‘for I know enough of her to be aware how much she is to be pitied.’

‘Yes, indeed, her life seems so sad, purposeless, and ill-disciplined. I have thought so much of her lately, and knowing her to be motherless, wondered if I might venture to advise her; but I would not do so, and be termed a meddling old goose, until I had endeavoured to ascertain how far it would be agreeable to her. You were the only person I could think of who could tell me.’

‘I do not know, indeed, Mrs. Wentworth. Marian is very warm-tempered and excitable, and I should fancy would be impatient of advice which did not agree with her own views; but she is very affectionate I

think, and would be grateful to have you to confide in, possibly.'

'And to ask advice which she would not take,' said Mrs. Wentworth, laughing; 'a common occurrence in female confidences.'

'Well, it may be so,' replied Nina. 'Poor Marian's life is a very solitary one, and if I was to judge of her by myself, I should think it charming to have you to cheer my solitude.'

'You are very good, but I do not think we must judge Marian by you. I should say no two characters could be so utterly unlike, and, therefore, I somewhat fear she will not care for an old body like me. But now look here,' continued Mrs. Wentworth, 'will you aid me thus far, by fixing a day to spend with me, and I will invite Miss

Ayrton to come as well. I think, in a quiet way brought together like that, I shall understand her better, and see how much farther I may venture with her. Cecil will be away a day or two next week, and we could have a nice quiet day to ourselves.'

Poor Nina could no longer avoid the confession that she and Marian were no longer friends, and, with the tell-tale colour again dyeing her cheeks, she said, 'I fear that arrangement would not be agreeable to Marian—there has been—we have had—that is to say we are not quite on such terms as we'—

'My dear Miss Elwyn, not another word,' said Mrs. Wentworth, hastily, endeavouring to release Nina from her embarrassment. 'If I am chosen to be an instrument of use

to that poor child, some way will be found without my disturbing myself. I sit a great deal alone, and often arrange schemes of usefulness for myself, when I had better be patient, and wait to have my orders given me. We are all too apt to try to find work for ourselves rather than take what is sent us. And now, my dear, I will not detain you another moment, morning visitors ought not to be long sitters,' and Mrs. Wentworth rose, and shaking hands warmly with Nina, left the villa, and all the way home wondered what could have caused Nina's confusion. She could not think that Nina had been in the wrong, although she knew it took two to make a quarrel. Still, she felt that the wild, ill-disciplined Marian was the more likely to have been the aggressor, and provoked the gentle Nina

beyond her endurance; so she determined for the present to leave matters as they were, and simply watch for any opportunity to befriend the poor motherless girl she could not help feeling such an interest in.

As she drove to her own door, on the steps, having just rung the visitors' bell, was the young lady herself who had been so much in her thoughts.

Marian ran down at sight of the carriage, and undoing the door, said, with a bright smile lighting all her beautiful face, 'Oh dear, Mrs. Wentworth, how lucky; I should have been so sorry to miss you.'

'And I you, dear Miss Ayrtton. Pray come in.'

Mrs. Wentworth followed Marian upstairs, and throwing open the door of her little snugery, said, 'In here we will go,

and be safe from interruption. Take off your hat and jacket, and stay to luncheon.'

'Thank you, Oh, I should like it so much,' said Marian. 'I am so much alone. Dear Papa is so poorly now that when he is not obliged to be out, he keeps in his own room, and I scarcely see him, often, not even at meals.'

'Poor child,' said Mrs. Wentworth kindly, taking Marian's hat from her, 'will you not come into my room and take off your jacket, and, I was going to say,' she continued, smiling, 'from force of habit, smooth your hair, but that would be a very antiquated speech?'

'Yes,' said Marian, blushing and laughing, 'everyone has rough hair now-a-days.'

‘Not everyone,’ answered Mrs. Wentworth.

‘Not you, certainly,’ said Marian; ‘but then you, I dare say, do not care for the fashion.’

‘Not when it is an ugly and unbecoming one; besides an old lady like me may indulge in one of the privileges of age, and do as she likes. But I know two very young and charming girls who do not follow the fashion—Miss Graham and Miss Elwyn, you know the latter, I believe.’ Mrs. Wentworth felt impelled to say this, she was anxious to note the effect on her companion.

Marian’s face changed instantly, and she answered, ‘I did know her once, but I have no wish ever to see her again.’

‘I am sorry I named her,’ said Mrs. Wentworth, quietly; ‘now let us go and get rid of our walking things.’

Marian followed her silently to the charming and elegantly furnished bedroom, which formed so striking a contrast to her own, and then said, suddenly turning to Mrs. Wentworth, ‘I should like to tell you all about Nina Elwyn and me—how badly, cruelly she has behaved—and you will not wonder that I hate her as I do.’

‘I should wonder at hate living in so fair a form, my child,’ answered Mrs. Wentworth, gently laying her hand on the masses of fine rough hair she had condemned; ‘but if you wish me to listen to any trouble or vexation I will do so most willingly, especially if I may have my

reward by being a peacemaker; but you shall not tell me until after luncheon, and then we will deny ourselves to visitors and I will devote myself to you. Now if you will return to the 'Sulky,' as I call it, I will write a short note I have to send and be with you in a moment.'

Thus, without any effort on her part, what she so much desired had curiously enough come about. She was to be made this poor neglected girl's confidante, and she fervently hoped, be of some use to her.

Marian went back to the pretty little room, and seating herself in a chair by the window, watched the doves for some time cooing to each other and dipping their beaks in the little fountain. Then she took up a photograph book lying on a table

near her, and opening it, saw in the first page an admirable likeness of Cecil. She pressed her lips to it, passionately exclaiming, half aloud, 'Ah! my darling, my beauty, I may even kiss you, there, and you will not look stern at me. And they couple *her* name with his, she is not worthy to dust his shoes; she shall never be his wife whilst I live.'

Still gazing at the portrait and absorbed in her own thoughts, she did not hear the door open, and started to her feet pale even to her lips as the words in a voice only too well known coldly fell on her ear,

'I beg your pardon, Miss Ayrton, I thought my mother was here; pray do not let me disturb you.'

'Oh no, not at all,' she found voice to
was only amusing myself with the

photograph book ; I did not know you had one of yourself, I suppose there have been hundreds given away,' and then she laughed the little foolish giggle which Cecil hated, to cover her own confusion partly, but partly also from the silly habit she had acquired of finishing everything she said with a little affected titter. The extreme pallor at his unexpected appearance had somewhat touched Cecil, and he would have felt a little sympathy for her, which would have softened his severe opinion of her conduct, but the return of the old silly flirting manner soon dissipated the tenderer feeling, and he merely said,

‘ It is some time since I had that photograph taken, and I have no recollection who became the possessors of such a trea-

sure,' and then there was an awkward pause. He went to the table and took up a book and put it down again without opening it ; and Marian sat with her long white fingers closely clasped over the photograph as though it was some support to her, her heart beating till she could almost hear it, not knowing what next to say or do.

To their mutual comfort Mrs. Wentworth entered, and Cecil turned eagerly to her, and anticipated her enquiry as to what had brought him home, as he seldom came in to luncheon, by saying :

' I should not have come back to lunch, mother, but I found a letter at the Chambers from Farrant, wanting me to go to him as soon as I can after Christmas Day. Have you any other views? I did not like to answer him till I knew.'

‘My dear boy, no. I like my own fire-side best in the winter, and I shall be pleased to know that you are away amusing yourself.’

‘I shall certainly like to go very much,’ said Cecil, ‘for beyond liking old Charlie himself, he offers me the further inducement of a trip to the coast for some wild fowl shooting. And if this sharp weather lasts, I shall hope to bring you a fine quantity of the food in which your soul delights—snipe.’

‘That will be charming; let me see, to-day is the 20th, is it not?’

‘Yes; Farrant has given me plenty of time, but I suppose he thought I should run off somewhere. Then I will write him a line, and say yes. Good-bye, till seven,’ he said, taking up his hat.

‘Are you not going to stay luncheon, now you are at home? Miss Ayrton is going to stay.’

‘No, thank you; I’m in a hurry. Good morning, Miss Ayrton.’ And Cecil, without another word, left the room.

Mrs. Wentworth, on noticing, as she could not fail to do, the ashy pallor of poor Marian’s face, had not glanced towards her during this short conversation, and the moment the door closed on Cecil, she began a conversation on some indifferent subjects until luncheon, and then said, ‘Now, I am going to sit in my listening chair, and you shall sit here close to me and tell me anything you like.’

Marian, irritated by Cecil’s manner, and his refusal to remain for luncheon, was just

in the humour to paint in glowing colours Nina's conduct, and accordingly commenced. She told how Nina had encouraged Robert's attentions until some boyish folly had got him into disgrace, and had then deserted him ; how it had almost broken his heart and made him reckless, and he had gone abroad, 'but still,' she continued, 'Mrs. Wentworth, he loved her truly, fondly, so fondly that he came back to England to try if she would listen to his pleading ; she only laughed at him—laughed at the love she had no heart to feel—and sent from her one who would have died to serve her. He left England again without letting us who really loved him know where he went, and we have never heard of him since ; have I not reason to hate Nina Elwyn ? for

I loved my brother dearer than anyone, almost, on earth.

‘My child,’ said Mrs. Wentworth gently, ‘hate is, as I told you before, too ugly a tenant for so fair a home ; I cannot bear to hear you say you “hate” anyone. From your view of the case you appear to have just cause of complaint against Miss Elwyn, but there is something so gentle, so intelligent and winning about her that I am unwilling to judge her harshly. I should, I own, like to hear her own story too ; the judge, you know,’ she said, smiling, ‘must hear both sides of the case ; perhaps what you in your love for your brother deem a boyish folly was a grave offence in her eyes, and made her feel she could not trust her
iness in such hands. My dear girl,

marriage is a graver thing than many imagine, and should, indeed, be undertaken soberly, advisedly, in the fear of God.'

'Robert is as good as she is,' said Marian, with childish petulance.

'Very likely; we have all our own peculiar ways of sinning, all, perhaps, equally bad in God's sight, and it would indeed be well if we could exercise the same enduring patience with each other that He shows to us; but a breach of the laws of society, a mean or dishonourable action, is, you know, judged very severely; and however leniently those who love the culprit may regard the fault, the world at large will not do so, and no one would choose to ally themselves to a person who, by some such act, had called on himself

this heavy judgment. But there is also another thing to consider; if you deem Nina so heartless, you cannot wish her to marry the brother you love so much; I should therefore console myself by thinking how well he had escaped such a fate.'

'But I don't know where he is, poor darling,' said Marian; 'and when I think that through her he is an exile, I cannot help my angry feelings.'

'One other way shows itself in this case,' said Mrs. Wentworth; 'a way which leads us out of many torturing feelings, many useless laments; it has been so ordered. One who rules all, knows better than you or I what is best for us. If it had been well for Nina Elwyn to be your brother's

wife, she would be, spite of her efforts or yours; if it were better for your brother to be in England near you, he would be here. Try to learn to think this in every trial that afflicts you, it will enable you to bear them, and prevent an evil feeling towards any fellow-creature ; we are only tools in the hands of a higher power, after all.'

'But is there anything I can do, do you think, to trace my brother? My poor father is so sad about him,' said Marian.

'I really do not know; I should fear that there would be great difficulty; but depend on it, my dear girl, if he has only left England in a fit of romance, he will cool down and come back to you all, having, perhaps, been worshipping at a new shrine with better success. Depend on it, some day he

will come home with a fortune, or you will hear from him as flourishing in some colony, laughing at the folly while he thanks it too for placing him where he is.'

'That is a very bright view to take of it, Mrs. Wentworth.'

'I always try to take bright views of everything; and now we will have no more gloomy talk. I am going to show you some exquisite works of art I am very proud of, and when I am alone pondering, as I often do, I shall think in what manner I can help you; some bright idea of drawing that truant home may occur to me.' And thus to the vacant mind of the poor neglected girl with gentle patience Mrs. Wentworth opened a fresh store of interest. The time passed rapidly and pleasantly, and though disap-

pointed at feeling her tale had evidently not prejudiced Mrs. Wentworth against Nina, still she went home better and brighter for the fresh thoughts that had been given her, the change from her own listless life at home, and glad to know that it was to Cecil's mother she was thus indebted.

CHAPTER XI.

It was Christmas-day, but no one would have thought so, for the dining-room window at Beechdale was open to counteract the effects of a log which, in honour of the season, was blazing away, to the great discomfort of the party assembled round the breakfast table.

There had been a slight mizzling rain in the early morning that had passed off, but it had left it damp, close, and altogether unlike one's preconceived notions of a 'Merry Christmas.'

‘Now whoever wants to go to church had better go and get ready,’ said Mr. Martyn; ‘I can hear the bells, how jolly they sound, I love a peal.’

‘Do you,’ said Nina Elwyn, ‘they make me sad.’

‘I have heard many people say that,’ replied her sister.

‘I thought something was the matter with Nina, she looks so awfully down on her luck,’ answered Martyn.

‘O what an effort of imagination, George,’ said Nina, laughing.

‘And so elegantly expressed too, George,’ said his wife rising from the table. ‘Mother, dear, you are going to church,’ she continued, ‘are you not?’

‘Yes, love, certainly ; is it time? I was

deep in the newspaper,' answered Mrs. Elwyn.

'Yes, I saw you were; have you found anything remarkably interesting?'

'Eh! well, yes, perhaps; to me it might.'

'Ha! ha!' laughed Martyn, 'what a graphic description of mother's study of the newspaper.'

Mrs. Elwyn gave a small echo of Martyn's laugh, and muttering something about being late left the room, carrying the newspaper with her.

'Well, at any rate mamma is determined no one else shall be interested for she has carried the paper off,' said Nina.

'So she has, I declare, how very funny, and you know I thought she seemed odd

and confused ; Nina, I declare I believe she has seen something in the paper,' said Mrs. Martyn.

' I suppose she has ; people usually look in the paper with that hope.'

' Now George, don't be ridiculous. I mean something particular. My curiosity is, I own, excited, and I shall peep into her room as I go by, and see if I can find out. Come along Nina, let us go and get ready.'

But Mrs. Martyn's intention to go into her mother's room was prevented by Stedman, who met her on the stairs and asked her to come into the nursery, for she thought baby was not well. ' It may be the unnatural 'eat of the weather, ma'am, but I should like you to see her,' and making an inclination of her head towards Nina,

she implied that she would prefer her mistress alone.

‘Go on, Nina dear, do not wait for me, and if baby is really unwell, I shall stay at home. You can go with mamma.’

Nina assented, and went to her own room, so that Mrs. Elwyn remained in hers uninterrupted, or she might have further stimulated Mrs. Martyn’s curiosity, for she was not getting ready for church, but re-perusing a paragraph in the paper and pondering whether she should tell Nina, or leave it to chance to discover it, and deciding on the latter course, she folded up the newspaper and prepared herself for church.’

‘We are to go without Emily,’ said Nina, when her mother found her in the hall. ‘She says baby is ill, and she does not like to leave her.’

‘Dear me ; it will be a good thing when baby has a companion. Emily is so fussy with this one that she will kill her with kindness if her attention is not directed elsewhere.’

‘I cannot see that there is much the matter with her myself, I own. Oh, here’s poor little Rita. Is someone going to take you to church ; or will you go with us ?’

‘I should like to go with you,’ said the child, lifting her lovely eyes to Nina’s face.

‘So you shall, dear ; tell them I have got you.’

Rita ran off to the servants’ hall to tell the maid who was going to take her she was going to church with Miss Elwyn ; and joining Nina again, they set off for the village.

Nina was not particularly fond of visiting the village, since the gossip that had arisen about her, and only therefore went there to church. She did not care for any of the people excepting the vicar and his wife, and Effie Graham ; and her greetings, beyond a passing bow of recognition, were confined to them.

The church looked very beautiful in its Christmas garb ; it was decorated with much taste ; not, in short, *overdone*. The shining leaves of the ivy, with the red berries of the holly gleaming amongst them, looked so well round the large white pillars. The moss and ferns round the stem of the font, with a cross of small white chrysanthemums floating on the water, a text or two, well and tastefully

made, and a few wreaths placed by loving hands in tender memory over the mural monuments which mark the date of the day of their life-long sorrow, and then, as the old clerk remarked, when he picked up a few leaves that still remained in the aisle after all was cleared, 'Our church looks like she'd ought to du ; she's allays beautiful ; but the beautiful ladies dresses themselves a bit more on great days ; and why shouldn't she, I should like to know ?'

Old Pearman loved the church, and spoke of it always as a living thing ; it had been father and mother and wife and children to him, he said. 'They had all gone home before him, and lay in the pretty churchyard, and he had nothing to be interested in now but the beautiful

old building, which was his earliest recollection.'

'Why my father, you know,' he would tell the strangers that he showed over it, 'was clerk afore me, and his father afore him, and the church seemed to belong to us like; there's not a hole or corner of it from the bell tower to the vaults, but I knows, and can put some sort of a story to. It was altered when the pews was so high as the little'uns couldn't see over. I can recollect a-setting just here in one on 'em between my mother and grandmother, and picking out the big letters in that very monument, and when I got home one Sunday—lor bless you, I can remember it as if it was yesterday—I copied 'em down on my slate and carried 'em to father to ask what they spelt. I think I see him now taking

out his big silver rimmed spectacles, and looking at my queer writing, and trying to puzzle it out. Why you see it would have puzzled a better scholar than he, to make out what S M J S C P spelt. You see I only knowed the big letters—Sacred to the Memory of Joseph Seaton, of Colsehill Park.' And the old man would laugh at the joke more heartily than his hearers. And beside the wreathed pillars and the gleaming holly berries, knelt Nina Elwyn that Christmas morning, and the Recording Angel would surely drop 'a tear, and blot from the Book for ever' the wandering thoughts that strayed from the good 'tidings of great joy,' to an exile from home and land, and bear to the Intercessor the prayer so earnestly breathed for one who had 'erred from His ways.'

Poor Nina, angry and disappointed, still the boy lover, whose love for her was so passionate, so wild, she could not quite forget, and could not quite believe was all bad. Christmas greetings were cordially exchanged as they left the church with the vicarage party and Effie Graham; the latter, they walked with to her own door.

‘How altered Effie Graham is, mother, do you not think so?’ said Nina, when they left her.

‘I saw so little of her, dear, when I was here, that I really cannot say I remember sufficiently what she was like.’

‘Oh she was bright, beautiful, and joyous—her eyes all alight with fun and merriment, and a ring of gladness in her voice that made you feel truly that “a thing of beauty is a joy for ever.”’

‘Dear me, Nina, you speak with the eloquence of a lover,’ said Mrs. Elwyn, laughing.

‘With the eloquence of an admirer,’ said Nina ; ‘for I do admire her most warmly, and it grieved me to see her bright face looking pale and wan. I must ask Emily about her.’

‘Are you talking of Miss Graham?’ asked Rita, who was walking holding Nina’s hand.

‘Yes, dear ; I think she looks ill.’

‘So she does, and she is not half so merry as she used to be before I went to school. I love her—she is so kind to me. I spent the day with her yesterday, and I like that, because she talks about my darling.’

‘And who is your darling — baby?’ asked Nina, smiling.

‘No, she is my little darling; but I have a big, grown-up darling, like Leander, and Fortunio, and Graceful, and St. George, and all those big, brave beauties that do grand and noble and kind things.’

‘Dear, dear! and who is this wonderful hero?’

‘Mr. Wentworth—Cecil.’

A strange smile passed over Nina’s face, and something like a blush, as she said,

‘And what has he done to win your love and admiration?’

‘Been kind and gentle to me always; but it is not that he *has* done anything great for me or anyone that I know; but he looks as though he could and would.’

‘Strange child it is,’ said Mrs. Elwyn in an undertone.

‘Yes,’ said Nina, in the same manner, ‘and with thought beyond her years. Look, Rita, there is your *little* darling at the window. I hope there is not much the matter with her.’

‘There is nothing the matter with her,’ said the child, in a sharp hard tone. The ladies exchanged glances and smiles, and entering the house, Rita holding up her face to kiss Nina, ran away to her own room, and Nina and her mother went into the drawing-room.

They found Mrs. Martyn there, alone, and on her face evidently traces of tears.

‘Baby’s better, is she not, Emily dear?’ said Nina. ‘We saw the pet at the window.’

‘ Yes, she is better now. She seemed so heavy and strange when I first went up. Oh mother, I am awfully worried. I don’t know what to do or what to think.’

‘ Why what is the matter, dear ?’ asked her mother, seating herself beside her.

‘ Shut the door, Nina, and I will tell you. Stedman says the baby was very restless in the night and cried a great deal; she is cutting a double tooth, and of course it distresses her. She says after some time she got her quiet, and she and baby both fell asleep; she was awoke by a slight rustling, and looking up saw Rita leaning over the baby with a bottle in her hand. She started up and asked her what she was doing. “ She was crying and moaning, and you,” said Rita, “ would do nothing but

sleep, so I gave her some stuff the old nurse used to give her." Till an hour since the child has scarcely roused. Mother, what does this mean ?'

'Mean, my dear ? well, that Rita thought she would be very clever and give the child some quieting drops, foolish things and dangerous if continued, but no harm for once.'

'Ah, well, I do not like it, and it has worried me more than I can say," said Mrs. Martyn.'

'That Stedman is a perfect idiot, she is always making up some story to frighten you, Emily,' said Nina. 'Just quietly tell Rita not to do so again; indeed make her give you the bottle and there will be an end to this alarm.'

‘No; I shall wait until George comes home, tell him, and make him speak to her. I have told Stedman that to-night the door between her room and the nursery is to be locked.’

‘Where is George?’ asked Nina.

‘He has ridden over to Westfield to see a college chum staying there, and will not be back till 8 o’clock to dinner,’ answered Mrs. Martyn; ‘but I hate speaking to Rita myself, I am always accused of being too severe, so I would rather wait for him. Oh mother dear, where is the newspaper you carried off?’

‘In my room, dear, I think; I’ll bring it down,’ and the old lady made a variety of signs to Mrs. Martyn, which were, unhappily, entirely lost on her; so that an

hour after luncheon, whilst Mrs. Elwyn was enjoying her 'siesta,' Nina possessed herself of the paper and discovered the paragraph her mother had taken such pains to hide. It was copied from a Canadian paper, and was as follows:—headed 'Heroic Act. A young Englishman very recently arrived here has won great honour by saving the life of Colonel Murray's child. It seems the little girl, only two-and-a-half years old, had strayed from her nurse attracted by some bright flowers at the edge of the cliff; by some accident the poor little thing lost its footing and slipped or fell over. The young man, walking near, witnessing the accident, went at once to the rescue, and perceiving that the child was resting on some stout

branches of a tree growing in the cliff, at his own great risk he managed to crawl to her awful resting-place, and, releasing her from her perilous position deposited her in safety in the arms of her terrified nurse. We hear the name of the young man is Robert Ayrton.'

Tears of joyful gratitude fell on the paper as Nina read.

At last credit attached to the name on which blame had so often rested. Stimulated by his own escape, and proud to think he had been the chosen instrument to save the child's life, he might find this his turning-point, and be perhaps at length worthy of the love he coveted.

'Poor Robert; I knew he was not all bad,' she mused, and running to her room

at once, paper in hand, she copied the paragraph, determined to say nothing to anyone until stronger proofs should come of his wish and purpose to lead a better life. This might have been reckless carelessness of his life, joined to a kindly impulse only. She would wait yet longer.

Nothing further happened to disturb the order of events. George Martyn returned in time to dress for dinner. The beef and turkey and plum pudding were undeniable, and poor little white-faced Rita, who came to dessert, was charmed to find in her plate a book of fairy tales, Nina's Christmas present to her.

Whilst they were taking coffee in the drawing-room after dinner the housemaid

requested permission to speak to her mistress.

‘Oh, if you please mu’m,’ she said; ‘Stedman has been so awful ill all this afternoon that she says she thinks she really must go home the first thing in the morning. She wants to go by the early train, and so I’ve promised her to go in to baby if you’ve no objection.’

‘I’ve no objection, but it is very awkward,’ said her mistress.

‘Yes, mu’m; but Stedman says it may be something ketching, and she’d better go, and come back if she gets all right.’

‘Yes, certainly; there seems nothing but worry.’

‘Oh ma’am, I’ll take care of baby, bless her, depend on it, and Stedman will

be back in a day or two. Don't you worrit yourself,' said the kind-hearted girl.

But there was need to worry the next morning; for when Lucy went into the nursery according to her promise, after Stedman's early departure, there was no baby in its little cot, or in the bed, or in Rita's room, or anywhere, where with anxious hearts and swimming eyes, the household all aroused, vainly and wildly searched.

CHAPTER XII.

A DREARY prospect of dark, muddy-looking sea and flat sandy shore, with here and there a martello tower standing as a warning to foreign invaders, with long flat plains stretching inland, of level pasture, dotted with sheep ; the meadows divided by deep ditches, or ' deekes ' as the country people call them, at the edges of which grow in profusion the rushes with their plume-like blossoms. ` On such a prospect, from the window of a little inn, Cecil Wentworth and his friend Farrant stood gazing.

‘It is not what you might term a lively look-out,’ said Cecil.

‘Well no, not exactly,’ answered Farrant, ‘but we did not come to search for the picturesque ; if this south-east wind would only blow up snow all our intentions would be fully carried out, but I have fears that at present it is scarcely cold enough for snipe.’

‘I fear not, but we will go in pursuit after breakfast.’

‘Unquestionably. And I think if you ring that bell again we might hurry that waiter, who is certainly nearly connected with the one of such deliberate movements that he is expected to be the last to arrive when the final trump shall blow.’

Cecil laughed as he rang the bell, saying—

‘I am not acquainted with the legend.’

‘Indeed, do you not know those lines descriptive of the dilatory servant concluding with this prophecy, “and when the final trump shall blow, the last that comes will still be Joe”?’

‘I cannot say I do; however, here comes our man,’ and the door was thrown open, and the waiter, a little spare pale-faced man, who looked as though he had been baked in a slow oven, brought in a tray laden with bacon, bread, butter, eggs, toast, &c., and depositing it on the side-board, said,

‘Did you ring, sir?’

‘Yes, we rang for breakfast, we are in

a hurry to go out,' said Cecil, 'be as quick as you can.'

'Yes, sir,' said the sad-faced little man, 'I am sorry to keep you waiting, but we've 'ad such a upset this morning, sir, the waiter was turned away. I'm only standing in, and I don't rightly know where the things are. I have been the undersexton, sir, that is the capacity as I've been employed in, but I find the work 'as such a depressing effect on my spirits that I'm giving of it up, sir, and so was glad to oblige Master Stoup, sir, by standing in, sir.'

'Exactly. Well, we shall manage here I dare say very well. Thank you, that will do,' said Cecil, as the little man stood for a second gazing at the breakfast

table with his head slightly on one side, in much the same manner as he might have looked into a grave to consider if it was sufficiently deep.

‘Thank you, sir ; yes, sir ; I think you ’ave all that you require, sir ;’ and with a funereal bow to both gentlemen this sad little man went out of the room, closing the door slowly and softly behind him.

‘What a ghastly personage to wait on one,’ said Farrant, ‘one might as well have a skull at once to remind us of our mortality.’

‘He is not lively, certainly,’ answered Cecil, ‘and I cannot compliment him on the viands which, after so much deliberation, he has brought us. The bacon is

hard and salt, and there is a fatal look about the eggs.'

'Well, we will despatch a few mouthfuls sufficient to give us strength for our morning's work, and converse seriously with the landlord on the necessity of a more respectable lunch,' said Farrant.

Accordingly, having finished a hasty meal they rang the bell and desired the presence of Mr. Stoup, the landlord; but they were saved that trouble, for Stoup himself answered the summons and Farrant at once made his complaint, and said he trusted he would provide a better luncheon.

'Really, sir, I am extremely sorry, but we are so much put about, sir, by having to discharge the waiter this morning. He

was a very good servant, sir, but addicted to liquor, and I had looked over it so many times ; but finding him quite early this morning totally incapable properly to fulfil his duties, I discharged him at once.'

Farrant accepted the apology, and ordered their flasks to be filled with cherry brandy, and asked if a boy could be found willing to accompany them, to carry the bag and guns. Stoup thought it quite possible, and soon returned with a red-haired boy, who, with a grin of satisfaction, accepted the office.

'I hope you'll be a good boy, Jem, and be civil and obliging,' said Stoup, as the gentlemen stood waiting at the bar for the brandy. 'He's the waiter's brother,

sir—Stedman I mean, that I sent away this morning,' he continued in an under tone. 'Not a very good stock they ain't, sir. Come, Betsy lass, look sharp, and fill those flasks. The sister, sir, lived at a farmhouse a mile or two from here, and went away with some uncomfortable story about a baby, who seemed to come by its death rather strangely; but the father's a poor harmless fellow, and there's a rare lot of 'em, so I try to help them. Now Jem, mind you behave yourself.' And with this reiterated injunction he handed the flasks to the gentlemen, and walking to the door watched them striding along over the rough hard ground, and turning back into the warm bar parlour with a slight shudder, said :

‘Well, there’s no accounting for taste, but I own this is more to my mind;’ and knocking the ashes out of his pipe, he re-filled it, and, lighting it, sat down by the bonny blazing fire to enjoy it, and watch from the little window the approach of any customers.

The first person who met his gaze, with oaken stick and leather bag strapped to his side, toiling along, was the postman.

‘Betsy, lass, here comes Porter. Likely there’s a letter from Davy; it seems long since we heard.’

‘Don’t come by this post, father,’ answered the girl, a bright buxom little lassie, just made for the situation she filled —barmaid to the inn.

‘Oh, don’t it? well, anyhow, there’s a

letter for some of us. Give the old chap a glass of beer; he gets old and feels the sharp weather.'

'All right, father,' answered Betsy in her bright cheerful voice; and going to the door, with a tankard of good ale and a hard biscuit, she awaited the arrival of the old postman.

'Good morning, Mr. Porter. Turned cold, ain't it?' she said.

'Yes, missus, we're going to have it and no mistake!'

'Sharp winter weather do you think?'

'Ay, ay, sharp enough.'

'Here's something to warm you, Mr. Porter,' she said, 'and to wish me the compliments of the season in.'

'Ay, ay, dat I du, dat I du,' said the

old man, raising the tankard very readily to his lips.

‘Have you a letter for me?’ she asked.

‘No; but for some one here, I reckon—
C. Wentworth, Esq.’

‘All right, Porter. One of our shooting gents; he’s out now, but I’ll take it.’

‘And how’s guv’nor?’ said the old man, wiping his mouth with his sleeve, and returning the tankard.

‘Nicely, thank you.’

‘Dat’s well—good morning,’ and without another word old Porter trotted off. Showing her nice white teeth in a pleasant smile, which hung about her ripe red lips as though loath to part with such good company, Betsy walked up the old crazy staircase to the ‘gents’ sitting-room and de-

posited the letter on the table; and then she went back to her work, singing blithely over it, while her father smoked his pipe in the bar parlour and heard the merry voice which, when it was silent, he missed as he would have missed the song of the birds. Many a time she sang him to sleep in the evening, and then went and stood beneath the porch, watching the tired labourers coming home, till one with scythe across the shoulder would come into the porch too, and with silent tones they would talk together till a thousand starry witnesses looked down on them, and the visitors in the tap grew too noisy and she was forced to say 'good night,' and go and bid father wake and keep them quiet.

Cecil and Farrant returned at one ; they

had strolled about near home, but with poor success. A pretty red legged tern and a few sand runners was all the sport; but they hoped for something better after lunch further afield.

‘A letter for me,’ said Cecil. ‘Who from, I wonder?’

‘Open it, child,’ said Farrant, ‘that’s the only way to find out.’

‘True,’ said Cecil, laughing; but his face changed as he read.

‘Farrant,’ he said, ‘I must leave you directly, the Martyns are in such trouble. This has been forwarded from London. I have no time to lose,’ and as he spoke he rang the bell. ‘I must have a dog-cart and get to the station at once.’

‘What is it—what is the matter?’

‘A curious thing, and sad, too. Their child, their only child, is gone—not to be found anywhere; and that poor little Rita you have heard me talk of is supposed to have had a hand in it; that is not true, I’ll stake my life. A dog-cart, Stoup, at once for the station,’ he said, as the landlord answered the summons. ‘I am so sorry, Farrant, but I must go. Read the letter,’ and he tossed it to him.

‘By all means, my dear fellow, and I shall go back to Adeline, who will bless any child, whatever she may have done, that will bring me back to her.’

‘I believe it. I have wondered how you got away.’

‘By promise of a quick return and a visit from her old nurse, whom next to

me she loves. I could not have left her alone. Well, our tardy waiter could not have harnessed the horse, for here is the trap at the door. I will go with you to the station. I shall take your things home with me, and expect you at the Oaks as soon as you can get away, to finish your visit.'

'Thank you very much, I will only trouble you with the sporting gear,' said Wentworth; the rest he quickly tossed into his valise, and in less than an hour from his perusal of the letter, Cecil Wentworth was hurrying to his distracted friends.

CHAPTER XIII.

GREAT was the distress and confusion at Beechdale. The poor missing baby's place had been filled up, and a new treasure lay in the mother's arms, but it could not console her ; and with alarm the doctor and nurse saw the feverish restlessness, and the impossibility to quiet or convince her that soon the child would be restored to her. Every means to discover it had been resorted to, but as yet no certain tidings had been heard. Martyn, who had been momentarily expecting the arrival of Went-

worth, neither could nor would do anything more until he saw or heard of him.

He was pacing the garden talking to Effie, who had been most kind and attentive in their trouble, when Cecil arrived.

He sprang from the shaky one-horse fly which had brought him from the station, and grasped warmly in both hands his poor friend's, who was too much agitated at first to speak. Sorrow and anxiety were new to Martyn: save and except the death of his beautiful young wife, he had known no care, and he never permitted himself to dwell on any sad reflections, never talked of sorrowful subjects, and avoided all his friends who were in any affliction. 'I cannot help them,' he would say, 'and it makes a fellow so deuced wretched.'

The combination of sorrow, therefore, at this moment seemed more than he could bear, and he was most grateful to see Cecil, for whom he entertained a higher opinion and warmer affection than for any of his friends.

‘What is all this about?’ asked Cecil directly. ‘Have you heard any news?’

‘None at all, none at all, old fellow. I’m fairly bewildered. I want you awfully. I want you to talk to Rita; I can make nothing of her; she keeps firmly in the same story. The inspector has seen her, and she told it to him in the same quiet way, and he says he is sure she is quite innocent, but Mrs. Martyn will not be persuaded of it, at least she would not, poor thing. But she’s very bad now,

and I'm not allowed to see her for more than a moment. You know, I suppose, that there's another poor little mortal?'

'Another baby; no, I did not.'

'Lor', no; how should you? It's an awful bore coming just now—not that the poor little thing could help it, of course; but oh, dear, I'm half distracted really. But come in, old fellow. What a fool I am to keep you out here in the cold! Where's Miss Graham?'

'I saw what I presume was Miss Graham go towards the house as I got out of the fly.'

'Oh, that's all right; she's gone in to see Nina, I dare say. The Elwyns are here, which is a great comfort.'

A slight flush passed over Cecil's face, but he made no answer.

‘It's astounding what a deal of good there is about that girl, to be sure; she has been so kind in all our trouble.’

‘Miss Elwyn do you mean?’

‘Oh dear no. I mean Miss Graham. Nina is always a good little quiet, useful thing, but to see that wild, harum-scarum girl being so interested and sensible and thoughtful was wonderful. Here, let us come in here,’ he said, dropping his voice, as they entered the house. ‘We are obliged to be so awfully quiet, the least noise disturbs her, and she thinks it's something about the child.’

‘Poor thing, I dare say; it's very per-

plexing. I suppose you have seen all the servants and questioned them?’

‘Every one of them, and they all say baby was in bed with the nurse, when they went to bed. She told them that they need not trouble to get up to see her off, she should only want some milk and bread and butter, and that, she had got in the room; she only asked the upper housemaid to go in and look to baby, and help Maria, the under nurse. When the housemaid did go in, Stedman and baby were both gone.’

‘Stedman! Is that the nurse’s name?’ asked Cecil quickly.

‘Yes; why?’

‘Do you know where her home is?’

‘No; that is one of our difficulties.’

Somewhere in Kent is all the maids can tell us, and she was going, she said, only to Godalming, where an aunt of her's lives, for change and rest as she wasn't well. We have sent there and can hear of no such person. Of course we have offered a reward, but we can hear no tidings.'

'It is very strange, but I think I have a trace of her. I will write by to night's post for further information; or stay, give me a letter to the woman herself and I will enclose it to the landlord where I have been staying, and bid him see if she resides there. He has this morning sent away a waiter of the same name, whose sister, he says, was discharged upon some suspicion about a child's death.'

‘Good God, Wentworth, do not suggest anything so horrible!’

‘My dear Martyn, I do not wish to make the case in any way worse than it is; but it is difficult to know why she should burden herself with a child: she is more likely to have got rid of it—if she is wicked or mad enough. Had anyone offended her?’

‘Dear, no, no one; but she has always doubted poor little Rita’s good intentions towards the dear baby, and frightened Emily to death the day before she went by telling her she had been awoke by Rita administering something to the child from a bottle.’

‘Nonsense, poor child! Can I see her?’

‘Who? Rita? Oh, certainly! But look

here, you have not had a mouthful to eat; let me get you something. I will have it brought here; Emily's room is over the dining-room, and she will hear our voices there.'

As he put his hand on the bell to ring there was a smothered sound of persons talking in an under tone, and then the door opened suddenly, and Mantle with apparently all the servants behind him came crowding forward, and all together exclaimed in breathless agitation—

'Sir, sir! baby, darling baby, is come home!'

'Heavens! What do you say? Where is she? bring her here. Hush! don't make a noise—don't let your mistress hear. Bring her quickly. No, no! I must go

to her ; her mother will hear her.' And hastily pushing the servants aside, he said, 'Where is she?—show me.'

'In the servants' hall, sir,' said Mantle; and hurrying with the others after their master, followed more leisurely by Cecil, they arrived at the door of the hall as Effie Graham, with tears of joy and excitement raining down her beautiful face, was coming out, carrying the child in her arms, followed by Mrs. Elwyn. Nina was with her sister. Martyn without ceremony snatched the child from Effie, and kissed her more heartily than he had ever done before ; and then eagerly demanded the particulars of her recovery, which Effie briefly related. A woman named Rawling, the wife of a gamekeeper, some ten or twelve miles off,

had gone to take something into one of the woods to her husband, and passing through a narrow path, to her astonishment she had found the child. It appeared in such an unnatural slumber that at first she thought it was dead, but finding it was not she took the poor little thing home, and made every enquiry in the neighbourhood about it. The moment she heard of a missing child at Beechdale she of course concluded that it was the one, and got a cart at once to bring the child on the chance.

Cecil Wentworth desired that the woman might at once come to him that he might further question her. Accordingly she was sent for, and a nice, bright, clean-looking woman was shown into the

room. He first enquired if she had met anyone in or on her way to the wood.

‘Well, yes, sir,’ she said, ‘just at the entrance I saw a very nasty-looking old woman, with a basket on her arm with cakes and such-like in it, but I did not take but little notice of her. She’d as much right there as I had, so I never thought about her.’

‘Do you think you should know her again?’ asked Mr. Martyn eagerly, as a sickly feeling stole over him, remembering the evil-looking old woman Rita had owned as her acquaintance.

‘I think I should, sir, she had such a very nasty face. I was dreadful concerned about the dear child, sir, for it seemed like in a sort of stupor, and it’s

my belief, sir, that the dear little lamb had had something give it and was put there out of the way to die. I shall never think no different.'

The story of the bottle in the night came back to Mr. Martyn's remembrance, and he wiped the cold damp from his forehead as the horrid suspicion forced itself upon him; but he sat quite silent whilst Cecil continued his enquiries.

'Had you never seen this old woman in your neighbourhood before?'

'No, sir, I can't call to mind that I had, but strangers do sometimes come in our woods for flower roots to sell.'

'Yes, true. Well, we are exceedingly obliged to you, and Mr. Martyn will, I am sure, reward you handsomely.'

‘Come this way with me, my good woman,’ said Martyn, ‘and I will with the greatest pleasure and gratitude write you a cheque for the reward which we have offered ; but it will not in the least acquit us of our debt of gratitude to you for the care you have taken of our poor darling, for I consider you have saved her life as well as restored her to us.’

Mrs. Rawling followed Mr. Martyn to the library, and Effie and Mrs. Elwyn, who had all this time been caressing and petting the poor baby, who had a strange wondering look on her little face, and looked very far from well, proposed taking her to the nursery at once, where they felt she would be more at home.

‘I think that would be better,’ said

Cecil, 'and I also think it would be better to let Mrs. Martyn's medical man be sent for, and break gently to her the return of the child.'

'I think it would,' said Mrs. Elwyn. 'I will send at once,' and she and Effie, still holding fast the new-found treasure, left the room.

They had been most careful to study the best means of breaking the news to the mother, but they had never thought of Rita. Since the loss of baby she had lived in the deserted nursery unnoticed, except to receive constant severe cross-questioning, and when the door now opened, and the poor nearly heart-broken girl saw the baby in Effie's arms, with a shriek long remembered she

sprang forwards, with her arms outstretched, her eyes starting from their sockets, and fell at the feet of the terrified Effie in strong convulsions. .

CHAPTER XIV.

How often does it happen in families that 'one woe treads on another's heels.' Thus, at Beechdale, having recovered their lost child, and Mrs. Martyn having borne the news better than they could have hoped, things might have assumed a better aspect; but hushed voices and softened footsteps, and the constant daily visit of the doctor tell that a fresh sorrow has arisen. Rita lies at the point of death. Brain fever had set in, and Dr. Reesdale shakes his head, and gravely

says that only a miracle can save her. What they would have done without the two brave young hearts and active useful hands, working with such good will, they did not know. Nina and Effie were like guardian angels in the house.

Stedman had written a letter the day after the recovery of the child, dated from a small inn in a village in the same county, saying she was so very, very ill she could not possibly return ; and as she could not expect her mistress to wait for her, she thought it best to resign her situation. 'Of course, madam,' the letter went on to say, 'I cannot possibly think of taking the wages due to me for the half-quarter, as I have put you to this great in-

convenience; but I shall be obliged by your sending my boxes to this address. How is *darling* baby? I hope Maria can manage her; I do think about her so much, precious lamb! May I take the liberty of sending her a kiss? and oh! pray, dear mistress, *watch her well*, and see that that old woman does not lurk about the park.'

This letter Mr. Martyn had opened, and he carried it at once to Cecil.

'What am I to think, Cecil?' he said. 'Rita's agony at seeing the child, and the frightful effect it has had on her (she is much worse this morning, brain fever, doctor fears), all confirm the too horrid suspicion. This woman is quite innocent, evidently—and you know I

hardly like to tell you even, old fellow; but the under gardener brought me yesterday a pair of Rita's boots he had found in the shrubbery by the gate leading to the meadow; and he says that hateful old woman had been talking to Rita at that very gate a day or two before, and he, according to my orders, had started her.'

'Humph! who is this old woman?' asked Cecil.

'Why, an old wretch who goes about with cakes and sweet-stuff, and she used to come and sell at Rita's school; that's when she knew her.'

'Can she be found, do you think?'

'Oh, bless you, we've been to her and can make nothing of her at all; the

mere fact that she was seen selling cakes to the child is nothing—the man saw her clean away, and the dear baby was not missing till the next day ; but the horrible notion in my mind is—I hardly like to give it words—that Rita gave to poor baby a strong sleeping draught, and carried her to the shrubbery to the old woman, who conveyed her away.’

‘What is the under nurse’s account?’ asked Cecil.

‘That she slept very late, and found Rita nearly dressed when she woke; she was roused by Rita calling through the door to know if Stedman was gone and baby awake.’

‘I cannot believe that Rita has any hand in it whatever,’ said Cecil, ‘it seems to me a diabolical attempt on the part of

Stedman to fix suspicion on the child, and I believe she gave baby the dose and carried her to the old woman—it is so strange that she should have been seen so near the wood, that it looks certainly as though she had a hand in it.’

‘Oh, you know she travels all over the county. I have ascertained that the fact of her being ten or twelve miles off is nothing unusual.’

‘No; but so near the spot where the child was put looks odd. How did Stedman go?—in what vehicle I mean?’

‘In the carrier’s cart, to catch the early train; and he says she had no luggage with her, only a small black leather bag she held in her hand. Of course we sent for him directly.’

‘Did he drive up to the house for her?’
said Cecil.

‘No; she told him that it would disturb her mistress, she would meet him at the stile across the meadows which comes out on to the high road.’

‘Ah! exactly, my dear Martyn. Put out of your head any suspicion of my little friend Rita; she is as innocent as one of heaven’s angels. Do you intend to pursue the matter further?’

‘No, most distinctly *not*; I have the dear child safe back. When Rita gets well again I shall, I think, place her with some relatives of her poor mother’s; for Emily, I know, will never get over the feeling about her. I dread to have the matter more

closely investigated, for fear suspicion should become certainty.'

'Well, as you will; you are well rid of the woman, at any rate, and now as I can do no more for you, I must go back to Farrant. I shall be there till Monday, and then home. If anything transpires, or I can be of the slightest use, send for me at once.'

'Thank you much. You intend to go to-day then?'

'Yes, this evening, please.'

But he did not go. Rita grew rapidly worse, and her father's distress was so great Cecil would not leave.

If he had thought Effie beautiful in her bright, joyous moments, what did he think of her now, as in her simple morning

wrapper, her soft thick glossy hair coiled closely round her head, she kept unwearied watch by Rita's bed. In her delirium the poor child thought it was her mother, and would not let her leave her, or take food or physic from other hands. She asked for Cecil eagerly one night, but she did not know him when he came; but flinging her arms round Effie's neck, she said,

‘ Sweet mother, now papa's dead, marry Cecil Wentworth, he is so good.’

Cecil stole softly and quickly from the room, and as he went down stairs he seemed to hear his mother's voice saying, ‘ Oh, what a sweet daughter you might bring me.’

CHAPTER XV.

MRS. WENTWORTH had received a few hurried lines from Cecil, stating the miserable condition of affairs at Beechdale, and had just finished replying to it, begging that if change of scene was thought beneficial for any of the party after their painful excitement they would come to her, when the servant brought her a note from Miss Ayrtton, saying an answer was required.

Badly spelt and badly written, on dirty blotted paper, she could scarcely decipher these few hurried lines:—

‘DEAREST MRS. WENTWORTH,—Could you come to me? my father is dying. Oh, do come! What shall I do?

‘Yours ever affectionately,

‘MARIAN.’

‘Poor child! poor child! Why everyone seems in trouble. I must certainly go to her at once,’ said Mrs. Wentworth, ringing the bell, which was quickly answered by her faithful manservant, who had lived with her ever since the death of her husband, and who thought that on earth her equal did not exist. Danby thought no one but himself could take care of her properly, unless possibly it might be Master Cecil, and of that he had some doubts.

‘Danby,’ she said, ‘I had not meant to go out to-day, and told James no orders, so you must get me a cab, and go with me to Dr. Ayrton’s; he is very ill, Miss Ayrton fears dying.’

‘Nothing infectious, madam, I trust,’ said Danby, with an air as much as to say, ‘I cannot allow you to go if there is.’

‘I should think not. I have heard for some time that poor Dr. Ayrton’s health was fast failing, and poor Miss Ayrton has no mother, you know, Danby.’

‘True, madam. I will fetch a cab instantly.’

In answer to the gentle knock given at Dr. Ayrton’s door by Danby, a manservant appeared, who in a hushed voice said that his master was sinking rapidly.

‘Miss Ayrton will see Mrs. Wentworth, will she not?’ asked Danby.

The man hesitated a moment, and then a head, on which was perched a very greasy cap, was popped over the banisters, and in a loud whisper the owner of the cap said—

‘Let Mrs. Wentworth come in, John; up here, up in Miss Ayrton’s room. This way,’ said the person, addressing Mrs. Wentworth, who alighting from the cab was following her up the broad staircase, wondering as she did so of what rank she belonged to, and what office she filled in the house. Her thoughts were answered by the person herself, as she turned round before opening the door of Marian’s room, and said—

‘My niece, ma’am, is very inconsolable; you’ll be prepared for very violent grief.’

Mrs. Wentworth had no time to reply before the door opened, and she found herself in the poor girl’s room.

In an old washed-out flannel dressing-gown, which had once been a beautiful turquoise blue, to judge from a new piece that had mended one wristband, with her hair falling about her shoulders, her feet slipped into handsomely embroidered slippers trodden down at heels, seated on the sofa, her face buried in her hands, rocking herself to and fro, was poor Marian. She raised her head at the sound of the door opening, and with a loud shriek flung herself into Mrs. Wentworth’s arms, sobbing forth a torrent of incoherent words.

‘Don’t, my dear,’ said her aunt; ‘giving way so you will frighten that lady, and it’s downright wicked. God’s will must be done.’

‘Go away, do,’ said the girl; ‘if you say that again I shall strike you.’

‘Gently, gently, my child,’ said the sweet tender voice, which seemed like oil on troubled waters. ‘Come, let me sit beside you; there, there, so,’ and taking the poor burning head between her cool soft hands, she drew it gently towards her and rested it upon her shoulder, and tenderly smoothed the rough hair from her burning cheek and ear, murmuring soft loving words the while, as a mother would soothe a weary child, till the sobs grew less and less violent, and the rain of tears

more abundant; and she motioned the aunt to leave them alone, and there was silence in the room for some time. Then Marian raised her head, and lifting her swollen eyes, from which the wondrous radiance was all gone, to her kind friend's face, she said, 'He is going from me, Mrs. Wentworth, and I shall have no one, no one on earth.'

'On earth, perhaps love; but that is of such little consequence, the time will seem so short when you meet again.'

'Ah! but I know nothing about that,' said Marian petulantly. 'I only understand what is, not what is to be; if Rob were only here,' and a fresh burst of tears poured forth. 'Poor dad asked for him,' she sobbed, 'and it was so dreadful to see

his poor face when I said he was abroad; but one great blessing is, I must own that I could say where with certainty now; here see, where is it? O, here it is,' and from under a heap of dresses, shawls, and magazines, she pulled a newspaper. 'This was sent me yesterday, and I was so delighted, going to run down and tell dad, when I was called to him quickly and he was insensible, and I could not tell him what he would have been so glad to know; there, do read it, see what a darling he is, my poor dear Rob.'

Mrs. Wentworth read the paragraph, and then turning to Marian who was still bitterly crying—

'Well, my dear child, this must be a comfort to you in every way. It speaks well

of your brother, and tells you where he is, so that you can write to him; and if it is decreed that your father's work is to end, and he is to enter into his rest, you can tell your brother of his death, and he will come back to you no doubt. Take courage from this, dear child, and try to see what a watchful loving Father you have above, who has been thus careful to send you this little light in your dark hour.'

'Yes, to be sure,' said Marian, lifting her head with that sudden change of feeling so natural to her, and almost a smile lighting her tearful eyes. 'It may bring me back my brother—my dear, dear Rob!—he was so good to me. I think I must just go and see how the dear old father is;

but I cannot stay in the room,' she said, jumping up. 'Why don't they come and tell me how he is?'

'Because there is nothing to tell, dear; probably he may remain like this for some days. Does he know you?'

'I don't think he does. He called for me when he recovered consciousness, but I don't think he knew me.'

'Well, I should advise you to keep on going to him, dear girl, and doing any little thing for him; it will help you by-and-bye. Go, I will stay here until you return,' said Mrs. Wentworth.

'It is no use, when I am there, aunt says I am so clumsy; and I cannot stand still and watch him, and do nothing, it is so horrid.'

‘Just go beside the bed, and take his hand, and kiss him; smoothe the bed-clothes or pillows; we cannot tell how far he knows who is beside him, and it would be sad to think he missed you.’

‘I’ll go then, certainly, but you will stay, won’t you?’

‘Yes, all right, if you wish me.’

‘Oh you darling, how good of you.’

She kissed, in her fierce passionate way, the hand Mrs. Wentworth held out to her with a tender smile, and went to her father’s room, and Mrs. Wentworth sat thinking of the poor girl, and wondering what was the best and kindest thing to do with her if she should be left alone in the world. She had been greatly disappointed in her first idea about her, and she was

now at a loss what to recommend. If, as she had heard, this common-looking person she called 'aunt' was her only near relative, a residence with her did not promise a home or a protection fitted for the wild impetuous girl.

Whilst she sat thus thinking, there was a hurried movement over head; that kind of bustle which for some reason tells us at once that there is an unusual cause for hurry, that something has happened. She started to the door, and opened it in time to catch the fainting form of poor Marian. Her father was gone; his last word was her brother's name, loudly called.

Then, indeed, was Mrs. Wentworth a comfort to the poor orphan girl. She bore so gently with her bursts of passionate

unreasoning grief; shielded her from the commonplace coarse effects at consolation administered by her aunt; drawing her away from her as much as possible; keeping her own silent gentle watch beside the poor girl, and when utterly exhausted, she slept for many hours, she sat beside her, ready at her waking (that fearful waking, after a crushing sorrow, too well known by those who have suffered) to speak soothing, cheering words with tact which made them suited to her hearer; and did not, as so many well-intentioned efforts of the kind do, irritate more than soothe.

She stayed with her until the middle of the next day, faithful Danby having been twice during the time to see if she was not

knocking herself up, and persuading her to let him come with the carriage for her at two o'clock.

‘ You see, madam, Mr. Cecil being away, I feel more anxious,’ he explained. ‘ He would be so distressed if you were ill.’ And so she smilingly assented, and chose the time to go when the poor girl was taken for a time from the sense of her desolation, by ordering and choosing her mourning.

There was no depth in poor Marian’s nature; wild, impetuous, and excitable, her sorrow for the time was excessive, but it was easily diverted, and, moreover, her grief for her father’s loss was more excited by her desolate condition, and the contemplation of her brother’s grief at never again seeing his father, than any strong affection

she felt for himself. This Mrs. Wentworth soon saw, and believed that after the first excitement and horror of the gloom occasioned by the death and funeral, she would quite recover her spirits. She promised Marian to see her again on the following day, and purposed then asking the aunt what arrangement was to be made for her future residence. As she kissed her and wished her good-bye, Marian murmured, 'Tell Cecil how wretched I am.'

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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